

**SETTLER WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF FEAR, ILLNESS, AND ISOLATION, WITH
PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO THE EASTERN CAPE FRONTIER, 1820 - 1890**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an exploration of diaries and letters written by middle-class English-speaking settler women living on the Eastern Cape frontier between 1820 and 1890. By according primacy to these women's experiences and perceptions, it aims for a greater understanding of women's encounters with the frontier, and how these were articulated in their personal writing. An emphasis on the recurrent themes of ill-health, fearfulness and solitude undermines the popular myth of the brave, conquering, invincible pioneers which dominates settler historiography to date. The tensions felt by white women living on the frontier disrupted their identities as middle-class Victorian 'ladies', and as a result these women either constantly re-established a sense of self, or absorbed some aspects of the Eastern Cape, and thus redefined themselves. Settler women's experiences of the frontier changed little during the seventy year period spanned by this study, indicating that frontier life led to a rigidification and reinforcement of old, familiar values and behaviours. Rather than adapting to and embracing their new surroundings, settler women sought to duplicate accepted, conventional Victorian ideals and customs. White Victorian women identified themselves as refined, civilized, moral and respectable, and perceived Africa and Africans as untamed, immoral, uncivilized and threatening. To keep these menacing, destabilizing forces at bay, settler women attempted to recreate 'home' in the Eastern Cape; to domesticate the frontier by rendering it as familiar and predictable as possible. The fear, illness and solitariness that characterise settler women's personal writings manifest their attempts to eliminate alienating difference, and record their refusal to truly engage with the frontier landscape and its inhabitants.

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PREFACE

“To ignore white ethnicity is to redouble its hegemony by naturalizing it.”¹

There can be no doubt that the arrival of the 1820, and later, other white settlers, heralded a consolidation of white power on the Eastern Cape frontier. These settlers, engaged in the conquest and dispossession of Africans, helped to bring about and secure a racially organized economic, political and social system, aspects of which are still intact today. Since the bulk of gender-orientated South African history has been written by white women academics, with various affiliations to assorted brands of feminism, it is not surprising that these women have recoiled from examining the role of white women in the process of creating the racist, white-controlled South African state. In delving into the history of settler women, white women today have to face their own guilt and culpability. Any simplistic ideas about a sisterhood of women are rendered ludicrous by an investigation into the past and the role of white women in it. Cleavages along lines of race, class and language fractured any possible shared sense of womanhood.

The popular notion of the brave, pioneering women who endured terrible hardships and indignities, subverts the stereotype of the frail Victorian lady, and presents feminists with possible role models. However, this is undermined by the firsthand accounts written by settler women who expressed feelings of misery, loneliness or the desire to go ‘home’, rather than

¹ Fusco, Coco cited in Julien, Isaac and Mercer, Kobena “De Margin and De Centre” in Morley, D. and Chen, K. (eds) Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies. London: Routledge, 1996, p.455

bravery, stoicism or victoriousness. Even when evidence is located that does reveal some settler women as courageous heroes who defied convention and played an active role in society, this was usually in the capacity of further entrenching white, imperial values and power, making these women troublesome, controversial figures for most feminists. In examining the lives, experiences, attitudes and writings of settler women, it is necessary to confront a myriad of contradictions, complexities and tensions that characterise their diaries and letters.

In this thesis I intend to explore these two intersecting themes, Eastern Cape settlers, and the history of white women over a period of seventy years. One of the aims of this thesis is to transcend the narrow, homogenous histories, that define people only as victims or perpetrators.

The firsthand accounts written by the settler women are entirely subjective and do not pretend to be otherwise. I am not interested in finding out ‘what really happened’ on the Eastern Cape frontier. Thus the texts (diaries and letters) examined *are* the truth. What settler women *wrote* and failed to write about is more meaningful than reconstructing a blow-by-blow account of events on the frontier. In addition, the process of selecting diaries and letters for inclusion, and the artificial way in which excerpts from these texts are organised, precludes any possibility of this study being purely factual or objective.

By giving centre stage to women’s voices and by focusing on their feelings and expressions of feeling, this thesis has a new and important contribution to make. The questions central to this thesis are: how did settler women negotiate the frontier environment, to what extent, if at all did their experiences change their identities, how are these experiences recorded in their

writings, how did they construct their identities through their diaries and letters? Also of utmost importance are the encounters English-speaking settler women had with African and Afrikaner women, and how these encounters were recorded. The tension between the impact of the frontier environment on settler women, and the extent to which these women shaped and changed that environment by acting on it themselves, is one of the main preoccupations of this thesis. It allows for some generalizations to be made about the nature of the frontier and characteristics of settler women as they changed each other, although the extent to which inhabiting the frontier actually brought about any change amongst settler women was limited.

1. INTRODUCTION

The settler makes history; his life is an epoch, an Odyssey. He is the absolute beginning. 'This land was created by us'; he is the unceasing cause: 'If we leave all is lost, and the country will go back to the Middle Ages.' Over against him torpid creatures, wasted by fevers, obsessed by ancestral customs, form an almost inorganic background for the innovating dynamism of colonial mercantilism.¹

The South African settler tradition is founded on two interrelated assumptions. First, the uncritical acceptance of the notion of European progress and its supposed benefits for Africa, and second, a belief in the bravery, determination and heroism displayed by settlers as they implemented the European system that was to bring this progress and civilization to Africa. Settler historiography is thus based on two myths that to a great extent have served to justify and legitimate white minority rule in South Africa. If white settlers brought civilization to South Africa, their domination of the country is legitimate, or so they believe. Similarly, their courage and resolution in the face of great hardship and opposition earned them the right to preside over the races they fought and overcame. In order to strip away the layers of meaning that constitute this historiographical tradition, it is necessary to examine its historical development.

Deconstructing a historiography that is composed of half-truths, romanticisations and distortions that directly serve the interests of a particular group is immediately problematic. During the process of unpacking the myths and stereotypes at the root of the established historiographical tradition, there is a danger of simply replacing the outdated generalisations and static images with new, opposite conceptions that are just as

¹ Fanon, Frantz The Wretched of the Earth. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967, p.51

unbending and inflexible as their precursors. While it is the intention of this thesis to challenge and undermine the South African settler tradition, particularly where it pertains to women, and to suggest a new, more complex way of understanding settler women on the Eastern Cape frontier, it does not seek to establish a single, rigid paradigm or to "see an epidemic where there are only isolated instances of different pathologies."² To merely contradict what has already been written is not only to make no progress at all; it is to ignore or obliterate the subtleties, uncertainties and inconsistencies that characterise human history and how it is understood.

In analyzing the origins of the writing of the South African past, and the settler tradition in particular, it is difficult to overestimate the influence of the works of G.M. Theal and George Cory. Both wrote from the perspective of the white settlers and, highlighted their struggles and hardships to reinforce their image as brave, determined pioneers.

Christopher Saunders has pointed out that,

Theal, the pioneer, the father of South African historiography, did more than anyone else to establish a tradition of strongly pro-colonist, anti-black historical writing, and to create the racist paradigm which lay at the core of that tradition and which served to justify white rule.³

Much of the history that has been written about white, mostly English-speaking settlers is informed by the works of Theal and Cory, and at the heart of these works are racist fictions. The two strands of Theal and Cory's work, written in the late 1800s and early

² Reed, John R. "Somatic Fictions: Imagining Illness in Victorian Culture by Athena Vrettos." Victorian Studies 39 (2) (Winter 1996), p.296

³ Saunders, Christopher The Making of the South African Past: Major Historians on Race and Class. Cape Town: David Philip, 1988, p.29

1900s, that are of direct relevance to this thesis are firstly their portrayal of blacks as ignorant, trouble-making barbarians who could only benefit from the civilizing influence of the settlers, and secondly, their representation of the settlers as fearless, courageous conquerors. These are the aspects of their writing that have, to varying degrees, been uncritically incorporated into more recent texts about the settlers, thereby calling the authority and historical merit of such texts into question.

Neither Theal nor Cory were professional historians, but both wrote within the school of Rankeanism - they claimed to be writing the truth and believed that in order to do this all that was necessary was to examine the records, archival and sometimes oral, and then to simply chronicle the facts in clear, unambiguous language. Theal did not believe in embellishing or adorning sentences, which is how he perceived any historical writing that went beyond a mere list of people, dates and events, and he used this analogy to illustrate his point, ". . . in the past years the prolonged personal intercourse with the natives . . . would have unfitted me for putting a gloss on literary work . . . In this respect I am like the farmers whose wanderings I have followed [the trekboers], who had plain food in abundance, but no means of decorating their dinner tables." ⁴ Not only does this reveal something of Theal's attitude to historical writing, it also evokes an image of robust, no-nonsense white farmers who did not need fussy luxuries, but could live off the fruitful land. As a child growing up in Canada, Theal was "saturated with tales . . . of the struggles of the pioneers," no doubt influencing his later sympathy for the settlers.⁵

⁴ *Ibid*, p.18

⁵ Saunders, C. "The Making of a Historian: The Early Years of George McCall Theal." South African Historical Journal 13 (1981), p.4

Theal's work was not as unbiased and impartial as he imagined. He wrote history to serve various purposes, one of which was to unite English and Afrikaans-speaking South Africans and to further the cause of the colonists. He did not support interference on the part of the British government and took the strong anti-imperialist, pro-settler position that had been advocated by Robert Godlonton and his sympathisers in The Grahamstown Journal in the mid-1800s.⁶

As many critics have stressed, it was Theal who invented the concept of 'White South Africa', and tried to forge a sense of national unity between English and Afrikaans-speaking whites, based on a shared past,

Not only had they confronted an enormously difficult frontier environment, the very stuff of new settlement history, as well as dealing with the most powerful native opposition in the history of settlement . . . But, more than that, the colonists had gradually come to terms with each others' cultures.⁷

This is Theal's core: he tried to undermine the differences between the British and the Boers in the face of a common enemy - the black majority. For Theal, white settlers were plain, solid, dedicated, hard-working people, and this is the image of them that persists in the minds of many white South Africans today, reflected in books like Guy Butler's The 1820 Settlers. This is a vitally important image as it has been used to prop up and sustain white supremacy. This representation reinforces the notion that white settlers earned the

⁶ In his book The Politics of Eastern Cape Separatism, 1820-1890 le Cordeur refers to Godlonton as the 'high priest' of the movement that promoted the interests of the settlers, encouraged investment in the Albany district and resented "an unaccountable credulity in our rulers in believing the statements of visionaries and theorists, in preference to the complaints . . . by men residing on the spot . . ."
(p.67)

⁷ Schreuder, D.M. "The Imperial Historian as 'Colonial Nationalist': George McCall Theal and the Making of South African History." in Gordon, M. Studies in British Imperial History. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986, p.98

right to control South Africa. Existing texts written about the settlers are thus no longer appropriate - they are rooted in a tradition that is at odds with a non-racist, democratic South Africa.

Theal and Cory's conception of what white settlers *were*, depended on their construction of what whites *were not*; which invariably meant outlining what it was to be black. Their assumptions about race infiltrated their writing, shaping and colouring the way that they recorded history, which was never simply factual, as they mistakenly believed. For instance, the title of Theal's major work History of South Africa, first published in 1889, suggests somewhat arrogantly and presumptuously that it is an all-inclusive and comprehensive account, when in fact it only begins in 1486, when European interest in the country was aroused. Both Theal and Cory depicted black South Africans in the worst possible light. The frontispiece of the third volume of Cory's The Rise of South Africa (published in 1901) depicts an African man sitting smoking a pipe against a peaceful rural background, and the caption reads, "Meditating Mischief."⁸

Theal subscribed to the Social Darwinism of the late nineteenth century and placed much emphasis on racial boundaries and their supposed connection with anatomical features such as blood type and brain size. For example, of the San he wrote that their jawbones were "only surpassed in feebleness by that of the Australian black." The 'Bushmen' were "more like jackals than human beings."⁹ Appalling generalisations and unfounded racist

⁸ Cory, G. The Rise of South Africa Volume iii Cape Town: Struik, 1965, frontispiece

⁹ Theal quoted in Saunders The Making, p.30

insults followed this sort of racial categorisation. Theal believed that Africans living on the coast of South Africa were far preferable to those living in the interior, "The man on the coast was brave in the field; his inland kinsman was in general an arrant coward. The one was modest . . . the other . . . an intolerable boaster." And, "a kraal on the coast was a scene of purity when compared with some parts of the interior, where all that the most depraved imagination could devise to rouse the lowest passions of the young females was practiced."¹⁰ The implications of this division between the 'civilized' coastal groups and the 'barbarous' natives of the interior are clear, only once Africans had come into contact with and begun to assimilate European customs, religion and culture, could they be said to be tamed. The frontier was in many ways the vanguard of this civilizing force - as the frontier moved eastwards during the course of the nineteenth century, so the expanse of 'tamed wilderness' grew.

Cory's The Rise of South Africa (volume iii), devotes several chapters to the arrival, difficulties and progress of the 1820 settlers. He places great emphasis on the terrible adversities suffered by the settlers, but then uses these to throw the settlers' victories into sharp relief. Cory states that the arrival of the settlers did "so much towards the development of the country" and that in spite of early failures for the settlers, of their crops, for example, "out of these failures arose the success of the subsequent generations, and now, nearly a century after the arrival of the transports in Algoa Bay, we enjoy the peace and prosperity the foundations of which were laid by the 1820 pioneers."¹¹

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p.32

¹¹ Cory The Rise, vol.iii, p.76

Most texts on settlers focus on the contribution made by this group to South Africa's Westernisation (the notion of progress and Westernisation are conveniently conflated). The fact that they were English is highlighted by several authors who associate Englishness with hard work, enterprise and commitment. Dorothy Rivett-Carnac writes that her Thus Came The English is intended to,

. . . satisfy the curiosity of anybody who is interested in knowing what type of people these English settlers were, why they came to the Cape, what difficulties they encountered and how, surviving many tribulations, they contributed to the building of the country of their adoption and came to constitute one of its most powerful and patriotic elements.¹²

Rivett-Carnac leaves no doubt as to what kind of people the settlers were. For her they were strong, heroic and an asset to South Africa. 1820 Settler Stories compiled by Sydney Hudson-Reed, declares that it is "Dedicated to the British sense of humour and courage which helped to lay the foundations of South Africa."¹³ He repeatedly stresses the tribulations endured by the settlers. For such historians, suffering and hardship legitimate and validate the settlers' claim on South Africa. The often violent conquest and dispossession that the settlers engaged in is apparently washed away by the trials and difficulties they endured.

Most of the major texts written about the settlers pay tribute to Theal and Cory: Butler's The 1820 Settlers preface notes, "Our indebtedness to previous workers such as G.M. Theal, Sir George Cory . . . will be obvious."¹⁴ While she recognises his inadequacies,

¹² Rivett-Carnac, Dorothy Thus Came the English. Cape Town: Howard Timmins, 1961, p.8

¹³ Hudson-Reed, Sydney (ed) 1820 Settler Stories. Johannesburg: Macmillan, 1970, title page

¹⁴ Butler, Guy The 1820 Settlers: An Illustrated Commentary. Cape Town: Human and Rousseau, 1974, preface

Isobel Edwards pays tribute to Cory's The Rise of South Africa and its "considerable amount of interesting information and local detail," in her book The 1820 Settlers in South Africa.¹⁵ She also condemns historians such as Macmillan for their tendency to "belittle the part played by the settlers in contemporary events."¹⁶ H.E. Hockly's The Story of the British Settlers of 1820 in South Africa acknowledges Cory and Edwards' contributions as the "only two works of any real importance" published in the first half of this century.¹⁷ The foundations laid by Theal and Cory are also evident in less serious, non-academic books written more recently, such as Rivett-Carnac's or Stanley Shuttleworth's 1820 Settler Women. These texts make reference to the writings of Butler and Hockly, which in turn refer back to Theal and Cory.

In short, there exists very little critical, inquiring material on the Eastern Cape settlers, with the notable exceptions of the work of Clifton Crais, Alan Lester and Noel Mostert. The contentions and conclusions of these historians will be addressed in subsequent chapters. However, most of what has been written about the 1820 settlers in particular, is tinged with colonial nostalgia and sentimental reminiscences, offering little or no insight into the lives of the colonized, or a challenge to the values and ideologies that underpinned the imperial enterprise.

Possibly, popular white support for the settlerist position was and is borne of anxiety. The

¹⁵ Edwards, Isobel The 1820 Settlers in South Africa. London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1934, p.156

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p.157

¹⁷ Hockly, H.E. The Story of the British Settlers of 1820 in South Africa. Johannesburg: Juta and Co, 1949, preface

conflict and change that fermented beneath the surface of South African society and came to fruition in 1994, made it all the more important for white South Africans to remind themselves that their power had been earned through bravery and heroism, that their position was historically entrenched. Roy Porter notes that, “an age of change does not so much erode, but actually intensifies, the need to root the present back in the past, to establish the stories of one’s origins, and the line of one’s life.”¹⁸ Also, while the damage caused by colonialism has been acknowledged in other post-liberation countries, South Africa’s own brand of internal colonialism is in many respects still in place. In the absence of a clean break from colonial rule and the resulting benefits of hindsight, white South Africans have failed to recognise that what they have always celebrated as settler achievements, were little more than naked, brutal forms of colonialism.

In very explicit ways, settlerist historians like Theal and Cory depicted black South Africans as backward and violent, and portrayed Europeans as bearers of progress and civilization. It is this dichotomy that writers like Hockly, Butler, Edwards and Shuttleworth are consciously or unconsciously sustaining when they use the works of Theal and Cory as foundational references. Together they have left a legacy that has shaped racial perceptions of both black and white South Africans, and they have left behind them an image of the settlers that other writers have embraced in overt and covert ways in their texts. This image has special implications for understanding settler women, who were not always brave, robust, heroic and triumphant. According to Strobel, "A critical perspective on the subject of European women in the colonies is all the more

¹⁸ Porter, Roy “Healthy History.” History Today 40 (November 1990), p.10

needed with the current resurgence of colonial nostalgia, and its particular manifestation of portraying heroic white women in colonial settings."¹⁹

It is not the intention of this thesis to dispute that the settlers suffered hardships, nor to suggest that settler women were never brave and determined, but to temper this image of them with a more realistic picture, and to examine what it meant when they did not conform to this image. On the basis of settler women's personal writings, it would be more accurate to describe the behaviour of the Eastern Cape settlers as resisting change and difference, rather than adapting to their new surroundings. While the English settlers may have contributed to South Africa in certain respects, they also contributed in other ways not acknowledged by the authors who glorify them. They helped to lay the foundations of racism, segregation and apartheid. Much of the time they were not brave, victorious or heroic, but selfish and greedy or fearful, lonely and ill. Their experiences were not uniform, as much of the literature suggests, but varied and complex, not always ending in triumph and success.

Most of the relevant literature resurrects all settlers, sometimes with special emphasis on settler women, as conquerors and survivors. Shuttleworth describes the women as "the unsung heroines of those times" and adds, "They gave birth mostly every second year. There were no antibiotics in those days and they mourned when their children died of diphtheria (the Black Death) or measles."²⁰ Black women on the frontier endured all these

¹⁹ Strobel, Margaret European Women and the Second British Empire. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991, pp.ix, x

²⁰ Shuttleworth, Stanley 1820 Settler Women. Grahamstown: 1997, p.xii

conditions at the same time, hence they are not hardships that can be used to single out white women settlers as special. The point is not so much what white women had to endure on the frontier, but what they had given up, sometimes involuntarily, in order to settle there. Shuttleworth does not recognise this and tries to highlight settler women's plight to prove how resilient they were to survive. Embedded in the settlerist perspective is the notion of the survival of the fittest - fighting and conquest means the right to rule and control.

Apart from the historiographical texts that form the academic and quasi-academic core of the settler school, there are other manifestations of the settlerist tradition. As a city, Grahamstown presents itself as the custodian of particular kinds of values, and draws on a version of history that reinforces these values and embraces ideals such as humour and bravery in the face of adversity, the entrepreneurial spirit and the protestant work ethic. These values are not only represented in history books about Grahamstown and the settlers, they are reflected in the paintings, monuments and plaques of the city. A recurring example is the story of Elizabeth Salt, told and retold in many of the settlerist texts. During the Battle of Grahamstown, which took place between the British and Xhosa in 1819, Elizabeth Salt, the wife of a British soldier, was able to assist the British at a critical moment by bringing them a barrel of gunpowder. She disguised a barrel of gunpowder as a baby, and carried her bundle through the Xhosa soldiers unharmed. The settler school has mobilised this story to illustrate the courageousness of settler women, to highlight the sacrifices they made and risks they took together with their men, to ensure the triumph of civilization, Christianity and progress over barbarism and heathenism.

Little attention has been paid to the Xhosa policy of non-violence toward women and children that is also part of this story, or to Elizabeth Salt's life after her heroic deed.²¹

A monument to Elizabeth Salt and to settler women stands in the High Street of Grahamstown, depicting a stoical, pious-looking Mrs. Salt emerging from a mob of bloodthirsty, savage-looking Xhosa soldiers. The inscription at the top of the monument reads, "To Pioneer Women and to commemorate an incident at the Battle of Grahamstown, April 22, 1819". Beneath this is written, "Keep their memory green and sweet, They smoothed the thorns with bleeding feet." The "thorns" are clearly metaphorical as well as literal. Women's presence on the frontier was meant to further entrench colonial values, to act as a smoothing, civilizing force. As Driver has noted, "it was considered essential for settlers to marry, for wives would stabilise British hold over the colonies and establish the colonial homestead."²² Elizabeth Salt did an exemplary job, as she directly assisted in clearing the frontier of untamed "thorns", in this case, the Xhosa. The reference to bleeding feet once again calls to mind the pains and hardships suffered by settler women, and the image echoes the Christian belief in redemption through suffering.

In reality, the city of Grahamstown flourished primarily because of the initial failure of the

²¹ Snyman, Rita "Heroine Elizabeth Salt had a hard, lonely life." Eastern Province Herald (Monday, 3 September 1962)

²² Driver, Dorothy "'Woman' as sign in the South African colonial enterprise." Journal of Literary Studies 3 (4) (1987), p.8

settlers to earn a living from farming. Natasha Erlank explains,

Although the settlers and their families were supposed to become farmers on their arrival at the Cape, the difficulties involved in farming led most to abandon the land allocated them in the first few years after they arrived. The soil of the Eastern Cape was not suited to the sort of farming any of the settlers were used to, while the size of their allotments was too little for pastoral farming. These factors together with their own inexperience were compounded by the effects of droughts, locust plagues and Xhosa raids. By 1825 most of the settlers has moved off their farms and into the few towns in the Eastern Cape. As a result, places like Grahamstown in particular, grew rapidly and developed a more comprehensive urban character.²³

Grahamstown's beginnings were not as illustrious as some historians have suggested. In several settler women's letters and diaries, reference is made to what a dismal, depressing place early Grahamstown was. Early copies of The Grahamstown Journal contain countless stories of failed settlers returning to Britain. The number of reported suicides surely reflects the psychological strain endured by frontier inhabitants.²⁴ In a letter written by Ann Francis, an 1820 settler, to her sister in England, she referred to Graham's Town as a "wretched place."²⁵ The idealisation of Grahamstown's beginnings and the glorification of the settlers' role needs to be systematically deconstructed. To replace the monolithic settler school, an approach that draws on the individual experiences of women on the frontier needs to be developed. While there has been a recent surge of interest in women's colonial memoirs, these are often a mere extension of the settler school,

A minor genre of female colonial memoir is emerging (the male colonial memoir has existed for some time). Some collectors of these reminiscences make little attempt to understand the indigenous peoples with whom the European women interacted. The result is a kind of romanticization of the difficulty and adventure

²³ Erlank, Natasha "Letters Home: The Experiences and Perceptions of Middle Class British Women at the Cape 1820-1850." Masters Thesis. University of Cape Town, 1995, p. 107

²⁴ For example, the 17 April 1890 issue of The Grahamstown Journal, reported 3 suicides.

²⁵ "The Editor" "A tale of two settlers." The Settler 66 (3) (1992), p.4

that life in the colonies entailed, particularly in the early days.²⁶

This is one reason why texts on the colonization of South Africa that focus on women are inadequate. Not only is the women's role romanticized, it is subsumed by the role of white men. Women are reduced to devoted helpmates who follow their men onto the frontier, unquestioningly fighting for the triumph of civilization and the colonial enterprise. Some would argue that the frontier was a manifestation of a male-led, patriarchal society anyway, in which case the women who fought the hardest for this to succeed, may have been the bravest and the most exceptional, but were also simply collaborators within a male system. Texts that assume that women were devoted to their men and the colonial project pretend to pay tribute to women and their contribution to civilizing the frontier but in reality, women are invisible in such texts.

Shuttleworth's 1820 Settler Women merely defines women in terms of their husbands, fathers and sons, in spite of paying lip service to the idea of brave settler women. In the introduction to this book, Shuttleworth freely interchanges the terms "wives" and "women." The entry on Mary Ann Godlonton reads, "Mary Ann Godlonton was born in England in 1785. She married Robert Godlonton in 1814."²⁷ The fact that Shuttleworth refers to Mary Ann as having been born with her married name, and that he fails to include any information about her life before she was married, implies that this was the key event of her life, that marriage provided her with an identity. This undermines any attempt on his part to focus on women. The rest of the entry on Mary Ann Godlonton describes her

²⁶ Strobel European, p.viii

²⁷ Shuttleworth 1820, p.76

husband's career, how many children she bore, and an extract from her obituary. The final paragraph assures the reader that after his wife's death, Robert Godlonton remarried and "played a prominent past [sic] in the affairs of the Settlers."²⁸ Shuttleworth's book is not about settler women. Despite the fact that many of the women Shuttleworth refers to wrote dairies and letters, the feelings and ideas they expressed are not included or analysed in any way in his book.

The ways in which women have been written out of the story of the frontier is evident in other literature on the Eastern Cape settlers. Morse-Jones' Roll of the British Settlers in South Africa lists married women settlers under their husbands' names, rather than as individuals in their own right.²⁹ Butler's The 1820 Settlers does not draw out the significance of women's arrival on the frontier, nor does he discuss gender roles and relations in the nineteenth century and how these were influenced by conditions on the frontier. Some brief mention is made of a few prominent women, such as Sophia Pigot, but generally women's stories are buried in texts about men's achievements, interests and experiences. Thus the first failing of existing material on Eastern Cape frontier settlers is one of exclusion and omission. Women are absent from the pages of these books, appearing only in the supportive role of wife and mother, with no contribution to make and no insights to offer.

The second inadequacy of material written about settler women is simply a specific failing

²⁸ *Ibid*, p.77

²⁹ Morse-Jones, E. Roll of the British Settlers In South Africa. Cape Town: AA Balkema, 1971

of settler historiography in general, that is, the romanticization and unqualified praise for settlers, which has already been discussed. The overriding tone taken in such cases is one of triumphalism. Almost without exception, books about the British settlers pay tribute to the pioneering spirit and heroic survival of the frontier inhabitants, and when women are included in such tributes, this is further exaggerated. These texts gloss over the fears, insecurities and tensions that are evident in a careful reading of settler women's diaries. Scholars of women's history have shed little light on the past experiences of white South African women. While in recent years there has been an increasing interest amongst some historians in South African *women's* history, this interest has largely focused on black women. It has been noted that,

The incipient 'women's history' has revealed important glimpses of the changing lives of African women and their political organization but may be, perhaps understandably, reluctant to grapple with the contribution of white women to the consolidation of 'white supremacy' in South Africa.³⁰

Most writing that has been completed on white women in South Africa is contained within texts about the Eastern Cape frontier and the white settlers who inhabited it. While it is settlers in general that this historiographical approach applauds and resurrects, the characterisation of all settlers as brave and determined pioneers has special implications for women living at a time when women were meant to be timid, reticent and fragile. If settler women living on the frontier can be said to have been courageous and persevering, then these women shatter the conventional model of Victorian lady-hood. If, however, the colonial endeavour is understood to be integral to Western patriarchal authority, then

³⁰ Van Helten Jean-Jacques and Williams, Keith "The Crying Need of South Africa': The Emigration of Single Women to the Transvaal, 1901 - 1910." Journal of Southern African Studies 10 (1) (October 1983), p.17

women's full and energetic participation in colonialism reinforces, rather than challenges the male order. In this analysis, women who were frail and afraid, who stayed at home and did not bravely fight as frontierswomen, presented more of a threat to the patriarchal order, in spite of the fact that on the surface, these women may appear to have been complying with the nineteenth century ideal of timid, sickly English ladies. Dorothy Driver comments that, "If the myth regarding white men is that they penetrated and tamed the 'dark continent', the myth regarding white women is that they made that continent 'livable'."³¹ However, both the brave frontierswomen and the lonely, housebound invalid contain elements of each other - neither is absolute. In the former, essential feminine qualities are retained, as highlighted in an essay entitled "Women Letter Writers and Diarists of South Africa, 1710 - 1862", published by E.L. McPherson in 1918. In discussing a picture of Augusta De Mist, one of the subjects of the paper, McPherson comments,

[Augusta's] hat is trimmed with what may be drooping plumes or a long veil to shield her face from the sun. The picture is so small I have not been able to determine which it is, but I incline to the veil, for the diary shows her to have been a prudent young lady, and therefore not likely to indulge in such frivolities as plumes when riding through heat and dust.³²

The message here is twofold. Firstly, McPherson emphasises that Augusta De Mist was not an impractical, silly, vain woman. She willingly rode a horse in hot, dusty conditions and did not fuss with extravagances such as plumes. On the other hand, McPherson is careful to draw attention to the ladylike veil that protected the white woman's face from

³¹ Driver, Dorothy "Woman as Sign", p.9

³² McPherson, E.L. "Woman Letter Writers and Diarists of South Africa, 1710 - 1862." South African Pamphlets 104 (1918), p.10

the sun. In spite of the "prudent," reasonable measures Augusta De Mist had to take in a harsh, challenging environment, her essential feminine traits remain. Exploring the tension between the traditional Victorian ideal of ladyhood and demands of the imperial civilizing mission, and how this was played out in everyday life is central to this thesis.

It is important to distinguish between what frontier women actually experienced (which can never be adequately recaptured), what these women wrote about themselves and their experiences in their letters and diaries, and what had subsequently been written about them by scholars and historians. Diary and letter writing performed an important function for women living on the frontier, where it seems that the large majority of women suffered from intense loneliness and isolation. Separated from their friends and families in Britain, corresponding with those left behind became a very important part of settler women's lives. When a correspondent felt her letters did not receive adequate nor frequent replies, the negligent writer was usually severely admonished. Letter writing provided women with the social interaction they so desperately craved. They were able to voice their grievances to relatives and friends, as well as receive news, advice and support from 'home.' Diary writing, while not interactive, also played a valuable part in the lives of frontierswomen, and an interesting tension exists between the way women represent themselves and their experiences in their private diaries and the way they portrayed these same experiences when writing letters home. There is sometimes a considerable discrepancy between the two forms. A diary entry and a letter written at the same time reveal a settler woman's interior world and private concerns, which were not always

consistent with the self-image she projected to her family at home.³³

Gayle R. Davis has researched the importance of women's diary writing on the American frontier and notes that,

The very act of keeping a diary can be explored as a significant coping mechanism, through which the women adjusted to the hardships, freedom, and challenges of the frontier. The diaries can be seen as mediators, in the structuralist sense, between the familiar and the new, as each writer consciously or unconsciously used her journal to meet her specific needs for adjustment.³⁴

Keeping a journal was a fashionable pursuit for Victorian women. For some women, it served as a means of reinforcing her identity as a Victorian lady, especially when the author "feared loss of that identity in the wild."³⁵ Many of the diaries used for this study are not filled with the authors' profound insights, observations and opinions. Instead they contain what appear to be trivial details of everyday life such as names of callers, the price of tea and sugar, the weather and numbers of cattle and sheep. Davis argues that the recording of these details served an important function, "By ritually enumerating the visitors, the quilts, the changes in the weather, even the deaths, significance and pattern were established. Experience was made tangible, finite, and controllable instead of remaining frighteningly unpredictable."³⁶

To some extent the diary indicates the existence of a private self and this in itself jars with

³³ For example, Ellen Case's diary reveals a lonely women plagued with financial and other worries, whereas her letters home are cheerful and positive, indicative of the way in which she identified herself to others.

³⁴ Davis, Gayle R. "Women's Frontier Diaries: Writing for Good Reason." Women's Studies 14 (1) (1987), p.5

³⁵ *Ibid*, p.7

³⁶ *Ibid*, p.12

the ideal of the Victorian lady who was expected to devote herself selflessly to her husband and family. Dale Spender argues that “Non-productive” personal writing was permitted “as an accomplishment and recreation”, provided that it did not “interfere with the business of being a woman.”³⁷ Indeed, in some Victorian circles, “diaries, like mirrors, were forbidden as frivolous and potentially dangerous, associated with self-love and auto-eroticism.”³⁸ On the frontier, an environment where all activities necessarily focus on survival, keeping a diary could seem a frivolous waste of valuable time and energy. However, women did keep diaries, not only on the East Cape frontier, but also on the frontier in the American West. Perhaps one of the reasons that women in these settings felt the need to keep diaries was because they “felt that their lives, briefly, had become part of history.”³⁹ Davis refers to this as the “deep freeze” function and writes,

The diaries’ first function . . . is their mediation between the past and present. In effect, they commemorate personal events by turning them into souvenirs . . . For the frontier writer, this souvenir function would have been especially important because the diary was one of the few private possessions in the sparse life of early settlements.⁴⁰

Most of the East Cape women’s diaries focus on frontier events, the experience of coming to live in South Africa and the family’s ability or inability to adapt to their new surroundings, rather than the individual women’s personal growth and development of self. These recorded experiences and feelings provide a useful tool for understanding the political, social and interior lives of settler women.

³⁷ Spender cited in Raoul, Valerie “Women and Diaries: Gender and Genre.” *Mosaic* 22 (1989), p.58

³⁸ Raoul “Women”, p.60

³⁹ Schlissel, Lillian *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey*. New York: Schocken Books, 1982, p.10

⁴⁰ Davis “Women’s Frontier”, p.6

The use of diaries as historical sources is not new, although in the past, historians have tended to “perceive diaries as source documents: important not in themselves but as eyewitness accounts of past events and lives.”⁴¹ The importance of settler women’s diaries lies not in the details they may provide about the Eastern Cape in the nineteenth century, but in what the texts reveal about the women themselves. In this analysis, the text *is* history, not “a source for a text” that will become history.⁴² Women’s diaries are especially significant because the diary and letter were often the only written forms of expression and commentary available to women. While men wrote publicly in books, articles and newspapers, women’s writing was usually confined to the private. Mary Jane Moffat argues,

The form has been an important outlet for women partly because it is an analogue to their lives: emotional, fragmentary, interrupted, modest, not to be taken seriously, private, restricted, daily, trivial, formless, concerned with self, as endless as their tasks.⁴³

For settler women, time and energy were at a premium, diminishing even further the possibility of public expression.

Allowing the silences and absences in women’s letters and diaries to be given as much attention as what *has* been written, is a vital analytical tool for making sense of settler women. As postmodernist scholar Ankersmit has observed, “what is most characteristic of a period [or of a people], most omnipresent in a period, is unknown to the period

⁴¹ Young, Cheryl Ann “A Study of Personal Literature Written in the Eastern Cape in the Nineteenth Century.” Masters Thesis. Rhodes University, 1994, p.1

⁴² *Ibid*, p.1

⁴³ Moffatt, Mary Jane and Painter, Charlotte Revelations: Diaries of Women. New York and Toronto: Random Books, 1974, p.5

itself.”⁴⁴ By concentrating on what a text excludes, significant moments and emotions may be detected between the lines. Events and subjects that were sidestepped and ignored may reveal what a particular era (or diary-writer) was concerned with.

Frequently, the diaries’ pages reflect the chaotic, fragmented experiences of settler women. Actual journal entries are interspersed with recipes, children’s scribbles, poems, shopping lists, sketches and household hints. Omissions often reveal unconscious or suppressed aspects of the women’s psyche. Many of the women divulge little about their real emotions, but this in itself is significant. As Davis argues, “most of the authors seemed to have tried to preserve their mental equilibrium by *avoiding* the direct expression of feelings or serious analysis of the meaning of their experiences.”⁴⁵ It seems the women feared the emotional release that may result from writing down and therefore fully realising their feelings of distress, grief or hopelessness. The example of Sarah Amm, who lived in Salem in the 1890s with her husband and family, illustrate this point. When her husband was ill with a diseased leg, Sarah Amm’s diary entries were bland and repetitive,

26th [August 1892] Simon still ill
 27th Much the same back and leg very painful and stiff
 30th Dr Drew came to visit pronounced it inflammation of the nerve and its sheath
 . . . ordered him to keep his bed, pain in leg dreadful
 3rd [September] Still in bed
 6th Still in bed
 7th Simon still in bed put the two plasters on the leg.⁴⁶

The fact that Sarah Amm displayed so little emotion when writing about a subject that

⁴⁴ Ankersmit FR “Historiography and Postmodernism.” *History and Theory* xxviii (2) (1989), p.146

⁴⁵ Davis “Women’s Frontier”, p.11

⁴⁶ Sarah Amm, September 1892

would customarily arouse some feeling indicates that she felt the need to control and censor her fear and anxiety to prevent it from overwhelming her. Victorian values encouraged “emotional restraint and ‘accepting God’s will’ as proper methods for facing traumas.”⁴⁷ Judy Nolte Lensink notes that many women diarists use trite metaphors and sentimental clichés when writing about grief or suffering,

lush metaphor in nineteenth century women’s prose about death and children, for example, is obfuscation, a camouflage of pat imagery provided by a culture that no longer values the very things that it sentimentalizes in language. The sanctioned images that diarists use to cope with death, for example, perhaps employ metaphor to stop raw emotion from pouring out onto the page.⁴⁸

This accounts for the flowery yet hollow words used by many of the women, and indeed some men diarists, to describe particularly traumatic events.

One of the key questions that can be answered by a close and sympathetic reading of settler women’s diaries is the extent to which the frontier environment enabled women to break out of their traditional domestic roles of helpmate, housekeeper and child-minder. The theory that the frontier relaxed and loosened women’s roles, allowing them to take on jobs usually reserved for men, thus becoming more independent and unconstrained, first arose in the United States, with reference to the American Western frontier. Frederick Jackson Turner’s “characterisation of the frontier as an environment which had a distinctive effect on human behaviour and which liberated American frontiersmen [sic]

⁴⁷ Davis “Women’s Frontier”, p.12

⁴⁸ Lensink, Judy Nolte “Expanding the Boundaries of Criticism: the Diary as Female Autobiography.” Women’s Studies 14 (1) (1987), p.41

from their cultural baggage”⁴⁹ has been used especially by feminist scholars to explain the ground-breaking, independent, free-thinking behaviour of a small minority of women in frontier settings. In her thesis entitled “The Imperfect Ladies: Four Victorian Women on the Eastern Cape Frontier: 1843 – 1879,” Gillian Vernon writes,

Their experiences gave these four women a wider vision of the world than was common to most of their female contemporaries and they were able to capitalise on the more relaxed social conditions on the frontier, break with some of the conventions which bounded their lives and obtain a sense of their personal identities as women in a male-controlled society.⁵⁰

This analysis of women on the frontier assumes that social conditions enabled women to move out of their traditional sphere and take up new and challenging roles. This is founded on the notion that away from the rigid social hierarchy based on class as well as gender of Victorian Britain, women were less constrained by societal demands and expectations. Vernon’s thesis examines the lives of four exceptional women who in some significant ways did defy the conventional ‘perfect lady’ ideal. One of these women, Dr Jane Waterston was the first woman doctor in South Africa while Harriet Ward has “excited interest from both a literary and historical point of view.”⁵¹ These women were rebels and their behaviour and experiences could not be said to represent nineteenth century frontier women.

Arguments like Vernon’s are part of the “golden age” theory that can be summarized as follows,

⁴⁹ Vernon, Gillian “The Imperfect Ladies: Four Victorian Women on the Eastern Cape Frontier: 1843 - 1879” Honours Thesis. University of South Africa, 1991, p.1

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p.3

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p.4

Women were scarce in the colonies, and all hands – male or female – were needed to sustain the growing settlements. Rigid sex role distinctions could not exist under such circumstances; female colonists could accordingly engage in whatever occupations they wished, encountering few legal or social constraints if they sought employment outside the home.⁵²

In many respects these sorts of arguments are nothing more than an extension of the frontier romanticization discussed earlier. They do not examine the diversity of women's experiences and tend to gloss over the real hardships that women may have been subject to. The "golden age" theory "rests its assessment of women's status solely on one factor (their economic function in society) and assumes too readily that a less complex social system automatically brings higher standing for women."⁵³ The drive for survival in a harsh environment (on both the American and South African frontiers) often meant that in reality,

women's productive work took place primarily within the confines of their own households; in England, the reverse may have been true. Economic conditions thus reinforced social trends that tended to make all American women more dependent on the family for the definition of their lives and roles than were their English counterparts.⁵⁴

The extremely isolated circumstances in which many women lived increased rather than decreased women's dependence on their families. Lack of access to formal schooling meant that women had to devote even more time to socialising and educating their children than in Britain. Clearly, it is impossible to generalise about the nature of women's frontier experiences. It is essential to view this territory as diverse and heterogeneous.

⁵² Norton, Mary Beth "The Evolution of White Women's Experience in Early America." The American Historical Review 89 (3) (June 1984), p.593

⁵³ *Ibid*, p.595

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p.601

In spite of this, in reading the diaries and letters of settler women, some observations can be made, some common ground does exist. As evident from the title, women's experiences of illness, fear and isolation will form the focus of this thesis. Nearly all the diaries used in this study make some reference to one or more of these experiences, often symptomatic of women's efforts to cling to their identities as English ladies. These are aspects of settler women's lives that have previously not been given special attention for their own sake, except to highlight women's courage in the face of these adversities. However, even the categories outlined for analysis here are more complicated and ridden with contradiction than they may at first seem. The image of ill settler women may evoke pictures of weak, frail Victorian ladies who simply could not withstand the hardships of frontier life and so delicately withdrew to their bedrooms to malingering as invalids. These women were not necessarily such victims. It is possible that at a time when personal space and the sense of a private, individual self were often denied women, the sickroom afforded them the opportunity of being alone, of being excused from their domestic and maternal responsibilities, of being given time for introspection, as well as the occasion to escape harsh frontier realities.

In this analysis, women were not victims of some conspiratorial patriarchal plot to keep them weak and silent in their sickrooms. Rather, women worked within the system to undermine the ideology that sustained that system. Some theorists have argued, "nineteenth-century women may have seen refuge, solace, purpose, and even empowerment in illness," but it is "painful to sort out which strategies of defining or using illness to subvert norms (illness as a resistance to patriarchal definitions) and which

collude (illness as an acceptance of patriarchal definitions.)”⁵⁵ The theme of illness is especially significant for settler women as they had not only their own bodies and sicknesses to contend with, but frequently also the illnesses of others. Their diaries and letters are full of examples of women taking care of sick husbands, children and parents, and this role of healer and care-giver, burdensome or perhaps self-validating, deserves further examination.

So too isolation and its frequent consequence, loneliness, are fraught with meaning and significance. While many women diarists complained of the remote circumstances in which they found themselves living, when they did receive guests, this became a different sort of a burden. Whether the guests were her own friends or family or those of her husband, it was the woman’s primary responsibility to be a gracious hostess to these visitors. Meals and sometimes accommodation had to be provided, even when circumstances were far from ideal. Thus the arrival of guests was for many settler women a mixed blessing - they provided welcome relief from the monotony of their daily lives, as well as company and social stimulation, but they also increased the domestic work load of women who were already struggling to ‘keep up appearances’ and maintain an English way of life on the frontier.

The issue of loneliness also reveals something of settler women’s ideas about race and class. Many women complained of feeling lonely and isolated, even though they were

⁵⁵ Herndl, Diane Price Invalid Women: Figuring Feminine Illness in American Fiction and Culture, 1840-1940. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993, p.2

surrounded by black and/or poor people. Women may have had the opportunity to make friends with others, but socialising with Africans was clearly not in their frame of reference. One diarist, Mrs. Ellen Case revealingly wrote, “It is awful being so far from a doctor, shops or a *white* friend.”⁵⁶ [emphasis added]. Class divisions, which had been slightly blurred by the frontier, were still in place and prevented some women from befriending each other. The extent to which settlers were a united, homogenous group may also have influenced the women’s feelings of loneliness. The sense of belonging to a cohesive, supportive group could potentially alleviate feelings of solitude and aloneness, as well as dispel fearfulness. Thus the apparently simple categories of fear, illness and loneliness were tangled up with other factors such as race, class, Victorian propriety, gender roles, the nature of the frontier itself, even age, education, urbanisation and access to resources. Settler women’s attempts to make sense of this tangle in their personal writing, is the subject of this thesis.

In order to make use of as much original writing by settler women as possible, the term ‘settler’ will be used with some license and flexibility in this study. The diaries and letters analysed here include those of both South African born settler women, and those who were born in Britain and immigrated to South Africa later in their lives. The tension between these two types of settler women provides a useful gauge for measuring the degree to which the Victorian culture and values of Britain were successfully emulated or rejected by colonial frontier inhabitants. Also, although this thesis focuses on the experiences of Eastern Cape settler women, some diarists from other areas, such as

⁵⁶ Ellen Case, 15 March 1889

Caledon, have been included. While these women were not strictly Eastern Cape frontier inhabitants, they were certainly subject to the psychological dimension of the frontier, in which they perceived themselves to be located in opposition a hostile and alien environment.

Although women's experiences and insights form the focus of this study, a few comments from male settler's diaries will be analysed for the added dimension they provide. The observations men made in their diaries about their wives, sisters, mothers and other women, afford a worthwhile means for understanding men's attitudes towards women, and also point to the different ways in which men and women interacted with their new environment.

Citations from women's writing have been transcribed verbatim, but archaic spelling has been corrected, and punctuation has been inserted where necessary to facilitate clarity and ease of reading. The poor spelling and grammar that characterizes so many accounts written by settler women is a reflection of the second-rate educational opportunities generally afforded them. Selecting and quoting a passage from a diary or letter is in itself an interpretive act, and the conclusions arrived at in this thesis are merely one way of reading settler women's texts. Thus editing and re-organising the form these texts take does not detract from the 'authenticity' or validity of the research. A flexible methodological framework and minimal theoretical jargon is meant to make a space for the centrality of settler women's own words and observations.

Some subjects have been referred to by their first name, others by their married title, for example, Mrs. Oertel. The distinction between these two forms of address was arrived at for a variety of reasons. There are two Mrs. Bowkers and several Harriets and Elizas, thus necessitating the use of both first and surnames. The style and content of women's writing, as well as factors like age and the way in which they refer to themselves, suggested the form of address. The term 'ladies' has been used freely to refer to the settler women in question, as this is how the majority would have identified themselves. However, the class, gender and cultural implications of this term will certainly be analysed.

All the subjects of this study were English-speaking women whose chief frame of reference was rooted in British values and conventions. The terms 'British' and 'English' have been inter-changed, meaning to suggest a broad cultural milieu, without paying much attention to the subtle distinctions that may exist between, for instance, Scottish and English immigrants. The settler women under scrutiny here all identified themselves as Christians, but within this generalised religious affiliation there were varying degrees of commitment and conviction. Most importantly, all subscribed to conventional Christian morality and sought to impose Christian ethics on black Africans, whose own values were generally dismissed as corrupt and inferior.

The selection of 'settler women' as a subject for study, and the conclusions drawn from their shared perceptions and experiences, is not meant to suggest that these women were a homogenous group. Christianity has already been mentioned as a commonality amongst

settler women, but divisions and factions existed within this shared belief system. Women were also split by their marital status, with the experiences of single women differing from those of married women. Almost all the women included in this study were married, or married soon after arriving in South Africa. Age also affected women's responses to the frontier. While strict British class divisions may have been diminished and re-organised on the frontier, class distinctions remained a feature of settler life. Most of the settler women discussed here were members of the middle-class, or at least had middle-class aspirations. Martha Jane Webber struggled all her life to earn a living, and others, like Ellen Case, found maintaining an English way of life in Africa costly, and were therefore constantly plagued by monetary worries. However, the concerns, experiences and impressions analysed here are those of women who whole-heartedly embraced the middle-class values of hard work and respectability. Unfortunately, aside from the letters of Hannah Dennison, very few personal writings of working-class settler women exist. Educational and economic advantages facilitated diary and letter writing amongst middle- and upper-class women, which means that our understanding of settler women is shaped largely by their world view as members of a privileged class.

The following chapters seek to explore the experiences of settler women on the Eastern Cape frontier, with special focus on the previously neglected aspects of illness, fear and isolation, which were symptomatic of the cultural clash that characterised the frontier. Reading settler women's letters and diaries as a sense-making mechanism women employed to negotiate the challenges of the frontier, enables these women's texts to shed light on how a settler identity came to be forged in the Eastern Cape. This identity

focused on a rejection and elimination of difference and a constant striving to maintain previous codes of behaviour, values, and divisions of race, class and gender.

2. THE FEMALE FRONTIER¹

Regardless of whether one is speaking of Indians, or blacks, or whites, the role of women in a frontier situation needs to be studied from a number of perspectives, be it that of helpmates, intermarriage, or as a governing force both within and outside the family unit.²

The frontier and its characteristics, insofar as the frontier can be attributed with any fixed, static qualities, was the centre around which settler women's diaries and letters were constructed.

While there is a substantial body of writing on the Eastern Cape frontier, little attention has been paid to the roles and experiences of women, especially white women, in this locale. This is reflected in Lamar and Thompson's statement, cited above, for their failure to seriously include women in their analysis in The Frontier in History: North America and Southern Africa Compared. A frontier is a geographical phenomenon that separates two or more groups of people (in this case the British settlers and the Xhosa), as well as a mental and emotional space in which these two groups construct their identities. The Eastern frontier was a literal and metaphorical divide between colonised and colonisers, civilized and uncivilized, lazy and hard-working, ignorant and educated, clean and dirty, and a host of other imagined dichotomies that underpinned the colonial endeavour. The women whose writings are the basis for this thesis inhabited this territory, it was their physical environment and their chief symbolic frame of reference. Their place on the frontier and their role in maintaining what the frontier *represented* is pivotal to these women's identities and is fundamental to how these identities are produced

¹ The title of this chapter is borrowed from a book by Glenda Riley entitled The Female Frontier: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairie and the Plains. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989

² Lamar, Howard and Thompson, Leonard (eds) The Frontier in History: North America and Southern Africa Compared. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981, p.314

and re-produced in the texts the women created. Uncovering the key features of the frontier contextualises settler women and locates their writing in a particular historical moment.

Perhaps the most important and most frequently overlooked feature of the frontier is that it represents change, it is a shifting, uncertain, contested zone. Thus, the Eastern Cape frontier was *not* a fixed region, but an area that gradually migrated eastwards, leaving behind it parts of the colony that had been secured for white habitation, and facing the untamed land and people that lay ahead. Lamar and Thompson provide this useful definition of a frontier,

We regard a frontier not as a boundary or line, but as a territory or zone of interpenetration between two previously distinct societies. Usually, one of the societies is indigenous to the region, or has at least occupied it for many generations; the other is intrusive. The frontier “opens” in a given zone when the first representatives of the intrusive society arrive; it “closes” when a single political authority has established hegemony over the zone.³

In this case, the “single political authority” was the Cape government, whose power and authority was consolidated by the settlers, especially the 1820 settlers. While the impact of the settlers was felt mostly in the Eastern Cape, the scheme to bring settlers to South Africa originated in Britain, and was “in line with British rather than Cape interests.”⁴ In the wake of the Napoleonic wars, Britain suffered an unemployment crisis and “in 1819 seemed to be on the verge of the sort of revolution that had swept over France precisely thirty years before.”⁵ In order to alleviate these

³ *Ibid*, p.7

⁴ Peires, JB “The British and the Cape, 1814-1834.” in Elphick, Richard and Giliomee, Hermann (eds) The Shaping of South African Society, 1652-1840. Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman, 1989, p.474

⁵ Mostert, Noel Frontiers. New York: Knopf, 1992, p.518

socioeconomic problems, or at least be seen making an attempt to do so, the British government allocated 50 000 pounds to assist the passage of five thousand settlers to the Cape.

Although the unemployment problem was the apparent motivation for dispatching settlers, the idea was first suggested by the Cape governor, Lord Charles Somerset to the Colonial Secretary, Lord Bathurst. Somerset's rationale was to "to strew them [settlers] across the Zuurveld (Albany) between Grahamstown and the Great Fish River, thereby to form a human barrier against the Xhosa."⁶ Thus part of the purpose of the settlement scheme was to secure British control of the Cape by stabilizing the frontier with families, symbolized by the presence of women.

According to Stoler, "the arrival of women [in the colonies] usually occurred in conjunction with some immediately prior or planned stabilization of colonial rule."⁷ Thus Somerset's "human barrier", was specifically a female one. However, the proposed scheme was shelved until 1817, when Lord Bathurst showed renewed interest in the idea, and set the bureaucratic process of organising the project in motion. This decision was to have far-reaching implications for the future of South Africa. After the momentous arrival of the first group of settlers in 1820, white immigration from Europe, and particularly Britain, continued for the rest of the century, and into the next.

Prior to the arrival of the 1820 settlers, the Eastern Cape was populated by the Xhosa and by

⁶ *Ibid*, p.518

⁷ Stoler, Ann Laura "Rethinking Colonial Categories: European Communities and the Boundaries of Rule." Comparative Studies in Society and History 31(1) (1989), p.147

isolated groups of Boers whose lifestyle “had come to resemble that of the indigenous populace in many more ways than the obvious ones of cattle and transhumance.”⁸ Noel Mostert draws a sharp distinction between the outlook, way of life and expectations of Boers and Britons which partly explains why and how the settlers transformed the Eastern frontier, and also sheds some light on the origins of settler mythology. His ideas are worth citing at length,

They [the Boers] had absorbed much in their deepest character of that Africa which had surrounded them for the century and a quarter that they had been wandering through the interior. They had absorbed its tradition of hospitality to the stranger (unstinting and generous), and it became their own most renowned tradition. They could be greedy and grasping in such small commercial transactions that came their way, but they had no restless material ambitions, no dreams of sudden riches. They hunted ivory, but had no gold fever, did not seek diamonds and other treasure. They did not possess the drive, as pioneers did in other new worlds, to conquer the wilderness, with visions of cities and expansion and prosperity. Their manner of living bore the appearance of poverty, for they had no material possessions to speak of, and wanted none, apart from a gun and ammunition. They lacked any philosophies of progress or concepts of sinful idleness such as those sealed within the evangelical religion . . . They had no conscience about the way they lived or expected to go on living. They did not prod the future. But every Briton did.⁹

Each characteristic Mostert attributes to the Boers finds its polarized opposite in the British, and this is especially true of the “restless material ambitions” and “dreams of sudden riches” that are by implication ascribed to the British settlers. While the Boers adapted to frontier life, and incorporated various African values and customs into their lifestyles, British settlers resisted adaptation and instead of altering their own behaviour and habits, endeavoured to alter the Eastern Cape landscape, its inhabitants and their traditions. The realization of the “dreams of sudden riches” in the transformation of South Africa’s economic, political and social structures is

⁸ *Ibid*, p.526

⁹ *Ibid*, p.526

part of what secured South Africa for white domination, and is seemingly what has given English-speaking whites cause for celebration.

The entrepreneurial spirit is certainly evident in settler women's writing. On the day before her arrival in South Africa in 1862, Sarah Childs (later Amm) wrote in her journal, ". . . tomorrow we shall tread on foreign soil and seek another home in our new country. God grant we may never have cause to regret the step we have taken."¹⁰ Childs' comment suggests that she certainly had expectations about her new home. She and her brother James, who accompanied her to South Africa, both intended to find employment and make a success of their lives, partly to please her "dear ones" at home, "with God's help I am determined to do some good for them yet."¹¹ In a 1848 letter to her parents Eliza Cousins expressed her pleasure at finding a "most comfortable situation" as housekeeper of the Salem Academy and wrote,

I get 30 pounds a year and if I stop after Christmas I shall have 40 . . . I often think of the difference for in London I have worked hard from 5 in the morning till 10 at night . . . I engage to say that dear Thomas [Eliza's brother] and myself are both well and happy. I think I hear you say there is nothing about coming back. To tell you the truth I know not what to say. Thomas says that much as he longs to see you all, he thinks as times are bad in England and good in Africa, he will stay a few years longer.¹²

This certainly confirms Mostert's ideas about British settlers' "material ambitions" and desire to exploit the frontier's money-making potential for individual gain.

¹⁰ Sarah Childs, Sunday 28 September 1862, p.14

¹¹ *Ibid*, Friday 1 August 1862, p.3

¹² Eliza Cousins, December 1848

In spite of the “dreams of sudden riches” indulged in by most settlers, this ambition was not shared by all who came to South Africa, as demonstrated by Harriet Rabone, who settled with her husband and children in Graaff-Reinet in 1853. A remarkable woman, Harriet cultivated cash crops to supplement her family’s income, read voraciously, taught art and authored bright, intelligent, witty and sometimes confrontational letters to her English friend, “Dear Agnes”. Her unconventional, refreshing outlook and ideas challenge all the stereotypical images of settlers, of Victorian women and of white middle-class frontier women. Temptingly easy generalizations are difficult to make when confronted by this exceptional woman - her judgement of greedy, wealth-seeking colonists underscores this, and at the same time demonstrates that this group certainly existed. She wrote to “Dear Agnes” in 1858,

Now I must have a quarrel with you like old times! ‘I wished much that you may soon make your fortunes and return’, says a portion of your letter. Of all the motives that urge immigrants to exertion, this is one of the worst, inculcating a hardness and selfishness of character, the bane of colonial life. Wish as much as you please that we may succeed in a worldly fashion, as well as in usefulness . . . but the desire to get all you can and go home and enjoy it is radically selfish . . . Many are the instances we meet here of the failure of this very plan, and well deserved they are!¹³

While Harriet denounced the “radically selfish” colonials, her comments suggest an alternative, equally exploitative mode of frontier life in which pioneers co-operated with one another, forswearing all luxuries and toiling together to conquer the wilderness, and by implication, its inhabitants.

Others immigrated to South Africa ostensibly for altruistic reasons, often with the intention of

¹³ Rabone, Arthur Records of a Pioneer Family. Cape Town: Struik, 1952, p.114

converting Africans to Christianity. Some were missionaries or missionary's wives, or the wives of churchmen and ministers, and these women tended to focus their expectations on their calling by God to this task. Mrs. Armstrong, wife of the Bishop of Grahamstown, wrote on her arrival in South Africa in 1854,

And here, having arrived by God's great mercy safe on the shores of our new country, I will end this uneventful journal with a thankful heart for our safe passage through the perils of the deep and the earnest and heartfelt desire to begin with fresh energy and vigour the new and arduous life which is before us. ¹⁴

Women who came to South Africa as missionaries, or to help their husbands fulfill their duties in this capacity, were often more prepared for the hardships that lay ahead. They realised that their lives would be "arduous" and were willing to endure this for the sake of their vocation. The authenticity of their desire to selflessly perform their Christianizing work is questionable, especially since nineteenth century Christianity focused much of its attention on the capitalist work ethic. Mary Moffat, matriarch of the famous missionary family, expressed martyr-like sentiments when on board ship bound for South Africa in 1819, "I only pray that I may be patient & not hanker after the comfort I have left. I have him [God] with me & that makes a prison a palace."¹⁵ While the realisation of the capitalist, money-making dreams of many settlers established on the frontier the 'civilized' political, economic and social system of Europe, missionaries made their contribution to the civilizing process through the teaching of Christian values, which in turn reinforced white hegemony.

¹⁴ Matthew, H.M. Grahamstown Diocese Historical Notes Volume 1. Grahamstown: Diocesan Office, 1957, p.37

¹⁵ Mary Moffat, p.25

If the purpose of the British settlers was to transmit the Western, Christian values of economic prosperity, progress, and stability to the Eastern Cape, what was the specific role of women on the frontier? Some scholars have crudely interpreted women's function on the frontier as merely biological. Shuttleworth, for example, emphasises the vital role played by settler women in reproducing, in order to swell the numbers of white English-speaking South Africans.¹⁶ While this may be true in part, a more sophisticated analysis of the question is required. Mostert stresses the ways in which Boers had adapted to the East Cape environment and attributes this to their emulation of "the indigenous populace." Part of this incorporation of African customs and practices was the similar system of extended families and clans found amongst most Boers. In many ways, the Boers and possibly all single white males had 'gone native'. This was a term used as, "(a) a shorthand expression for sexual relations with African women," and to describe "(b) a European who lives among Africans, takes their point of view and defends their interests; (c) a European who does not conform and is therefore excluded from the colonial group and considered to belong to 'the other'."¹⁷

The unsettled lives of many single men, and that of the Boers especially before the early part of the nineteenth century, meant that in order to survive they had to employ whatever methods were available to them. Boers "borrowed from Khoikhoi culture the use of milk sacks and the

¹⁶ Verbal communication with Dr. Shuttleworth, 10 February 1999

¹⁷ Callaway, Helen Gender, Culture and Empire: European Women in Colonial Nigeria. Basingstoke and London: Macmillan Press, 1987, p.247

preparation of long strips of dried meat” and “copied Khoikhoi construction practices.”¹⁸

Interacting with and learning from the local population Boers were able to adapt and survive by employing strategies and ways of life that had already been successful for others. Miscegenation had become common practice amongst Boers and other early settlers. A fixed abode and settled lifestyle associated with women and their domesticating influence, in addition to an accumulation of wealth and the entrenchment of capitalism, radically changed the way in which white colonizers, Boer and Briton, related to Africans. British settlers were set apart by the fact that they were comprised mostly of nuclear families, with *women* as the lynchpins of these families. These white women were expected to limit, as far as possible, the influence of Africa and Africans on the British settlement.

Making the frontier habitable, in other words, creating an environment as similar to ‘home’ as possible, was the patriarchally-defined role carved out for settler women. Victorian women’s capacity for homemaking was mobilised in order to affirm and entrench the gender, class and race stereotypes of that era. In an essay entitled “Colonial Fairy Tales and the Knife and Fork Doctrine in the Heart of Africa,” Nancy Rose Hunt discusses the importance of the cultural colonization that was carried out largely by white women.¹⁹ Table linen, roast beef with mint sauce, rose gardens, English tea, and European etiquette were of enormous significance to settler women who found themselves far from home and in what they perceived to be uncivilized and

¹⁸ Crais, Clifton C. The Making of the Colonial Order: White Supremacy and Black Resistance in the Eastern Cape, 1770-1865. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp.42, 43

¹⁹ Hunt, Nancy Rose “Colonial Fairy Tales and the Knife and Fork Doctrine in the Heart of Africa.” in Hansen, Karen Transberg (ed) African Encounters With Domesticity. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992

hostile territory. In an effort to keep barbarous forces at bay, colonial women went to great lengths to reconstruct their environment so that it resembled what was familiar to them. Margot Winer argues convincingly for the significance of women's domestic endeavours,

In the face of what they perceived as a giant emptiness, these women went about domesticating their new, and sometimes temporary worlds. It is the activities of immigrant women, as a 'civilizing' force, that play a central role in the creation of a frontier identity. In asserting their domestic values certain women attempted to create a structured predictable domain of respectability, gentility and decorum.²⁰

The critical question is whether this role of making the frontier liveable, and thus according women the responsibility of cultural custodians is one that women themselves desired, sanctioned, rejected, and succeeded or failed at. To what extent was this role a male construct and to what degree did settler women challenge and subvert this standard identity, and in what ways? The frontier was a psychological space in which identities were called into question. Race, gender and class were radically destabilised and one of the ways in which settler women negotiated this, was in their domestic capacity.

The nineteenth century, while not monolithic or homogenous, was dominated by the Victorian era, an age characterised by certain distinctive values, norms and principles that remained virtually unchanged during the seventy year period spanned by this study. Acceptability and respectability were central to Victorians, whose obsession with petty rules and keeping up appearances maintained the rigid class and gender distinctions of the time. The identities of men

²⁰ Winer, Margot "'The Indulgence of the good wife's cravings' - gender, commodities and domestic space in a nineteenth-century colonial settlement." Gender and Colonialism Conference. University of the Western Cape, 1997

and women were circumscribed within very specific gender roles, and “its [society’s] most pervasive and effective form of control was through the social and individual demand for respectability.”²¹ Stereotypically, women were confined to the private sphere of domesticity, aspiring to wifedom and motherhood, while men engaged with the public sphere of business, politics and money. This is not to say that women’s position was not related to the public domain, “the private, personal image of the nineteenth-century English woman was in her own time inextricably related to her social place and role.”²² Broadly speaking, Victorian women were characterised as weak, shallow, frivolous, demure, obedient and of course, ladylike, with all the manners, dress and affectations this entailed. The models of Victorian male and female behaviour were expounded by John Ruskin in a series of lectures given in 1864, entitled “Of Queen’s Gardens.” Ruskin identified the ideal of Victorian manhood,

The man’s power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention; his energy for adventure, for war, and for *conquest*, wherever war is just, wherever conquest is necessary.²³ [Emphasis added]

Women’s power, on the other hand, was “not for battle, - and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision.” This “sweet ordering” was confined to the home, which was described as “a place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all

²¹ Vicinus, Martha “Introduction: New Trends in the Study of the Victorian Woman.” in Vicinus, Martha (ed) A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women. Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1977, p.xix

²² Kanner, Barbara “The Women of England in a Century of Social Change, 1815-1914.” in Vicinus A Widening Sphere, p.201

²³ Quoted in Callaway Gender, Culture, pp.32-33

injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division . . . a sacred place.”²⁴ This was part of the Victorian cult of domesticity and imparting this system to the frontier was one of the functions of the white woman settler.

Since women were generally excluded from the public sphere, and since the Victorian ideal of womanhood credited women with possessing an abundance of compassion and tenderness, it has been the assumption of several scholars that white women were more sensitive and sympathetic toward the colonized. Expounded by certain feminists who prefer to resurrect women who believed in the principles of equality, and for whom the idea of ‘sisterhood’ is feasible, this argument ignores the fact that colonialism itself was the product of a patriarchal society. For a white woman to resist the colonial process, she would have had to abdicate her position as cultural custodian of ‘whiteness’, and thus denied her identity. Colonialism and imperialism went hand in hand with the male-orientated culture of conquest that Ruskin spoke of. The patriarchal characterisation of men as war-hungry aggressors fuelled the colonial enterprise. On the whole, settler women did not resist the gender roles assigned to them, nor did they oppose the racism and rampant greed of colonialism. Although they seldom actively contested their gendered position, many settler women found themselves faced with a disturbing set of inconsistencies in their dual role as settlers and as Victorian ‘ladies’.

While Victorian ladies were expected to be prim and reserved, settlers were expected to be

²⁴ *Ibid*, p.33

robust, sturdy and hard-working.²⁵ Settler women were somehow expected to take on both these roles simultaneously. The ideal of the domestic angel inevitably came into conflict with difficult frontier conditions in which survival was a priority. However, keeping up domestic rituals was one way that settler women could maintain their identities and make a contribution to the ‘civilizing’ process at the same time. By directly instructing or teaching by example, settler women could impart Victorian values and Ruskinian gender roles. In other words, by being the epitome of the English Lady, the white woman could make her contribution toward building the Empire without compromising her ‘femininity’. However, the East Cape frontier was a harsh, un-English, sometimes hostile environment, and white women were not always able to uphold their gender, race or class position in the face of this. This contest over identity on the margin between colonizers and colonized caused settler women a great deal of anxiety. The causes and repercussions of this anxiety tell the story of the frontier in a new way that makes room for contradictions and inconsistencies that being a Victorian, a woman, a settler, a frontier inhabitant, and a white colonizer involved.

Frontiers, and women’s place on the frontier has been theorised by several scholars, especially American academics interested in the role of women on the Western frontier in America. In an article by Margaret Walsh that traces the evolution of thought on American frontierswomen,

²⁵ It is interesting to observe the differences in the characterisation of settler or pioneer women, and memsahibs (white women in colonial India) in literature on women and imperialism. While the former have traditionally been cast as brave, sturdy and long-suffering, the latter have been stereotyped as “passive, lazy, self-centered social butterflies.” [Chaudhuri, Nupur “Memsahibs and Motherhood in Nineteenth-Century Colonial India.” *Victorian Studies* 31(4) (1998), p.518]. The difference probably stems from the fact that pioneer women in South Africa or North America were forging a settlement, whereas white women usually stayed in India temporarily, and were part of the military and ruling establishment, and did thus not have to struggle to earn a living.

some parallels can be drawn with regard to the East Cape frontier. According to Walsh, the first efforts to include women in the history of the frontier depicted women as “passive partners” who “endured primitive conditions in housing and severe hardships in domestic responsibilities or they worked themselves into an early grave through extra tasks and childbearing.” This representation was favoured by historians who were, “basically interested in the romantic adventure of the frontier, the political process of state-making or the triumph of western development.”²⁶ In South Africa, this is the approach favoured by Butler and Shuttleworth.

Later, as Women’s History began to emerge in the 1960s and 1970s, a new historical approach was developed that focused on recovering the experiences of frontierswomen. This approach concentrated on women’s private lives, using diaries and letters of women as source material, and demonstrated women’s “desire to retain their domestic functions as wife, mother and moral arbiter” as well their “flexibility in adjusting to domestic demands under primitive conditions and in undertaking new functions which gave them a more active and public place in frontier life.”²⁷ This tended to emphasize women’s supposedly nurturing, caring natures, thus relieving them of any responsibility for the conquest that was an integral part of the frontier. Moreover, this school assumed that women’s apparent exclusion from public life limited their opportunities for conquest and ‘civilizing’. It is a contention of this thesis that the apparently private, domestic activities of settler women played a crucial role in the colonization process that was fundamental

²⁶ Walsh, Margaret “State of the Art: Women’s Place on the American Frontier.” Journal of American Studies 29 (2) (August 1995), p.242

²⁷ *Ibid*, p.244

to securing the frontier for white domination.

Various feminist historians have in recent years revived the theories of Frederick Jackson Turner to suit their own purposes. Turner's conceptual framework, developed in the 1890s, stressed the importance of the frontier in history, and its influence on frontier inhabitants. Turner believed that this influence liberated pioneers from their "cultural baggage and the complexities of civilised societies and created new people."²⁸ Some feminist scholars have used this theory to suggest that frontier conditions, such as the need for all pioneers, men and women, to work together to survive, led to a relaxing of gender roles, enabling women to enter the public sphere and work outside the home. This is viewed as a triumph for women's liberation. While there are examples of settler women who did indeed transcend the stereotypes of their times to work outside the home, and in Vernon's view become "imperfect ladies," these women were exceptions to the rule, and the extent to which they really challenged the prevailing order is debatable. All four women analysed in Vernon's thesis were of middle-class extraction, and while they may have broken with some Victorian gender stereotypes, their attitudes toward race and colonial conquest demonstrate their support for imperial and by implication, patriarchal authority. Being "imperfect ladies" may have undermined some ideals of womanhood, but moving outside the realm of domesticity also meant more direct participation in the colonial enterprise.

²⁸ Vernon, Gillian "The Imperfect Ladies: Four Victorian Women on the Eastern Cape Frontier: 1843-1979" Honours Thesis. University of South Africa, 1991, p.9

In addition, as Mary Beth Norton has pointed out, settler women were not always able to take advantage of the apparently liberating influence of the frontier. The contrast between the “self-sufficient, independent, colonial woman and the oppressed, middle-class victim of industrialization confined to her home by a stultifying ideology” has been used to serve various interest groups and is not necessarily an accurate analysis of frontierswomen. For one, equating women working outside the home with women’s liberation is problematic,

That paradigm has been exposed as simplistic and unsophisticated, as a theory [such as Vernon’s] that rests its assessment of women’s status solely on one factor (their economic function in society) and assumes too readily that a less complex social system automatically brings higher standing for women.²⁹

In fact, it seems unlikely that frontier life for women was the liberating experience sometimes depicted. If anything, the threat to group and individual identity that the frontier represented, resulted in identity being carefully guarded and preserved, leading to a rigidifying rather than a relaxing of values, ideals and mores. As Chaudhuri has asserted, while the perception of the colony as a “land free of societal limitations” may have existed, “in reality women often merely exchanged the restrictions of Victorian society for those of the colonial world.”³⁰ In addition, pioneer women were disadvantaged in several ways that locked them into their domestic roles more inflexibly than ever. For instance, in spite of her apparent capabilities, Martha Webber felt unable to contend with her life as a lonely, hard-working trader without the assistance of a husband. After the death of her first husband she decided to remarry, although this decision cost

²⁹ Norton, Mary Beth “The Evolution of White Women’s Experience in Early America.” The American Historical Review 89 (3) (June 1984), p.595

³⁰ Chaudhuri “Memsahibs”, p.519

her more than it benefitted her, “I found it a great struggle to manage with my young family, my eldest son being only about sixteen years old, so I decided to marry again. My choice was not a happy one, but this alas I found out too late.”³¹ Martha’s motivation for remarrying was based on her inability to care for her family in the challenging East Cape environment by herself. Thus frontier life locked her into a traditionally dependent marital relationship to an even greater extent.

In England, the industrial revolution meant that increasingly, women were working outside the home. In contrast,

The American [or, comparably at this time, South African] economy offered women few opportunities to work for wages, even if they had the time and the inclination. Most of women’s time was probably occupied with subsistence activities. The overall pattern is unmistakable: in the colonies, women’s productive work took place primarily within the confines of their own households; in England the reverse may have been true. Economic conditions thus reinforced social trends that tended to make all American [or white settler] women more dependent on the family for the definition of their lives and roles than were their English counterparts.³²

The scarcity of schools in frontier areas meant that women were often expected to instruct their children themselves, thus placing even greater emphasis on their role as mothers, and as cultural custodians, “The amount of time a mother spent with her children was rendered all the more significant by her obligation to educate them in the rudiments of learning, to teach them religious precepts, and to guide their behaviour.”³³ This confinement to domesticity was pivotal to white

³¹ Martha Webber, p.33

³² Norton “The Evolution”, p.601

³³ *Ibid*, p.607

women's contribution to the civilizing process. There is a complicated double bind at work here. Settler women who seemingly challenged accepted behaviour for women by working outside the home or by speaking out on issues pertaining to women, were undermining one aspect of the dominant ideology, while supporting another, since the public work they engaged in inevitably served the interests of Empire, and thus propped up patriarchal/ imperial authority.

This is not to say that women who were confined to the realm of domesticity were not engaged in exerting colonial control. Part of women's role on the frontier was to epitomise perfect English ladies, thereby imparting the cultural and social values of their society. It also possible that housebound settler women, apparently cut off from the public world and thus from the impetus for self-development associated with that realm, found alternative outlets and means of self-fulfilment. Settler women's diaries are part of this quest for self-fulfilment that was for many women, a private, interior process that could take place on their own terms, rather than the public process it may have been for supposedly revolutionary women or "imperfect ladies", who were seen to be breaking new ground by adapting themselves to a man's world, rather than actually affecting real change in the structure of their society. There is an unresolved tension between the sometimes conflicting, sometimes compatible demands made on nineteenth century settler women, firstly by their status as women, and secondly in their capacity as colonizers.

Categorizing and organising settler women's experiences over a period of seventy years, in which the Eastern Cape changed so drastically, is a difficult task. Location, or location relative to the frontier seems to be the most logical organising principle. Proximity to the actual frontier,

perceived distance from the symbolic features of the frontier, as well as urban or rural situation are all factors that influenced women's feelings about their settler existences. The frontier was especially stressful for women arriving in South Africa between about 1820 and 1850, or for women living in a remote part of the Eastern Cape where the frontier borders had not yet been secured by the British, and where there were few other whites and even fewer white women. However, nowhere was the threat of barbarism and lack of civilization felt more keenly by settler women than when they were travelling, away from their homesteads and often beyond the boundaries of the frontier. Here, women's attempts to maintain their domestic and cultural rituals become even more significant. To preserve a sense of themselves as British ladies, they spared no effort in keeping up their familiar customs. Martha Jane Webber, who travelled as a trader with her husband in the interior of the country for most of her adult life wrote this description of camping in Rouxville in 1858,

I had had a lot of fowls killed at the station the night before and we had rice as well, but the problem was how to cook the meal as there was not a stick or any kind of fuel to be seen, but we were so desperately hungry, and 'where there is a will there is a way', so we cooked the pots with grass and tar, using the tar which belonged to the wagons!"³⁴
[Underlining in original]

As homemakers, women were expected to provide meals, and this is clearly a duty that Mrs. Webber did not wish to evade, even under difficult circumstances. She shows an obvious pride in having overcome the obstacles that almost prevented her from fulfilling this role - she was determined not to allow the primitive, unwieldy, untamed environment she found herself in get the better of her and her family. Her feminine supper-making victory won under trying

³⁴ Martha Webber, p.30

circumstances, mirrors the values and objectives of the colonial scheme.

Cleanliness, surely one of the cornerstones of civilization as it was perceived by settlers, is a focal point of the travel journal of Johanna Moresby-White. Johanna, or Rosie, as she was called, lived with her husband Ted and their children on the farm “Oriel,” near Modderpoort in the Orange Free State. In 1886, she and her three small sons accompanied Ted on a trading trip into the interior of the country, and the events of this trip are recorded in her travel journal. This journal has been included for analysis because although Mrs. Moresby-White was not living on the Eastern Cape frontier, she nevertheless felt herself to be living and travelling in a wilderness, and reflected aspects of a frontier mindset in her writing. Domestic arrangements of the journey fill the pages of the journal, as Mrs. Moresby-White tried to maintain as many of her homely rituals as circumstances permitted, but conceded defeat on several occasions, “We tried to bake a pudding for Cecil [her son] in the baking pot but it was not a success for the top got burnt & the inside not cooked at all, so the rest of the journey he had to have paps [porridge] of various kinds made with condensed milk.”³⁵ Mrs. Moresby- White, was especially anxious to keep up the personal cleanliness of her family and wrote of her efforts at keeping everyone clean,

In the late afternoon we went down and had a good wash in a stream - Cecil & Robert a bath there. Cecil threw his dress and socks in the water so we put Robert’s pinnafore round him & on his way back after his nice bath he just walked straight thro’ a boggy place & tumbled down in it, so had to be washed again.

A few days later, “I took Robert down to wash with me but all the water was dyed with sheep

³⁵ Johanna Moresby-White, p.9

dip & so had to give it up . . . then we went to another part of the spruit . . . and had a delicious wash off in stony water - not muddy as usual.” And then, “On Sunday afternoon we took Robert’s bath down to the spruit & gave him a bath in his bath, much to his glee.”³⁶ To prevent the dirty, dangerous, unmanageable environment from encroaching on her, Mrs. Moresby-White took “good wash[es]” and gave her children “nice bath[es],” however impractical and unrealistic this may have been. Generally speaking, settler women embraced their civilizing/ domesticating role. Sometimes this took the form of direct domestic education, as in the training of servants, sometimes women merely provided a model of domesticity, from which it was hoped that Africans would learn.

In a letter to her parents narrating her 1848 journey from Port Elizabeth to Grahamstown in an ox wagon, Eliza Cousins explained, “As soon as it began to get dark we stopped. The men lighted a fire and soon had the kettle to boil and I had my tea in style, after which I ventured to look out.”³⁷ It was only after fortifying herself with the very English tradition of tea that Eliza could face looking out of the wagon. Interestingly, it was the black wagon drivers who made the tea, not Eliza. In her case, she did not feel compelled to take control of this domestic, womanly duty, as these men had obviously already been conveniently domesticated. Eliza’s description of herself having “tea in style” underlines her self-representation as an English lady. There are elements of fear of the unknown, and possibly of the men, and nervous anticipation in the letter. “You would have laughed to have seen me seated in the large open wagon looking with amazement at my

³⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 24, 26, 27

³⁷ Eliza Cousins, December 1848

black, unknown companions, all men,” and later, “Not a house or living thing could I see with the exception of those I was with. I thought, oh, if my dear Mother could see how frightened she would be.”³⁸ Clearly, Eliza was also frightened but disguised this with bravado and humour, and presented herself as adventurous and exotic. Her description of the men is vaguely menacing but their tea-making diffuses this somewhat. The tea ritual served as a reminder for both Eliza and the reader that she was set apart from her companions and environment, that she was a white woman and a civilized lady.

The ‘civilizing’ presence of women was certainly valued by men. Several men’s diaries make reference to women’s homemaking capacities and the difference this made to frontier life. On visiting a basic, unsophisticated mission house, Bishop John Armstrong wrote in his journal, “Still was wonderful how the hands of English ladies had contrived to diffuse an air of comfort, and how contented under these rude roofs they all seemed to be.”³⁹ It seems that Frances Armstrong, the Bishop’s wife, was not always able to live up to the domestic ideal her husband valued. In a letter to a colleague he wrote that, “as Mrs. Armstrong was much weakened by domestic trouble that had fallen upon us . . . I resolved to take her with me, [on a trip into the interior] and introduce her to these new scenes.”⁴⁰ Bishop Armstrong’s anxiety about his wife’s “domestic trouble” and his desire to distract her from this with a trip was only partly out of concern for her. He also wanted to ensure that she was able to resume her proper role as

³⁸ *Ibid*, December 1848

³⁹ Carter, TT A Memoir of John Armstrong. Oxford: John Henry and James Parker, 1957, p.290

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p.285

homemaker, wife and mother.

Later in his diary, Armstrong referred to, “Mrs. Rhein, a happy, bright, contented-looking woman, clearly fitted for a missionary’s wife” who, “soon had a beautifully white table-cloth spread, a nice tea prepared and we all became cheerful together over our refreshing and simple meal.”⁴¹ This contented woman was unlike his “weakened” wife and it seems that in this description the Bishop was evoking his ideal of womanhood, a woman who is happy and uncomplaining in her duties. This excerpt is particularly significant because it exemplifies the role of the white settler woman. Mrs. Rhein was a missionary, whose white table-cloth symbolized white womanhood at its domestic best, thereby providing Africans and all women, black and white, with an idealized model. Mrs. Rhein and her white tablecloth went a long way in keeping the frontier divide between civilized and uncivilized in place, and this underscores Stoler’s contention that, “in the colonies respectability was a defense against the colonized, and a way of more clearly defining themselves [as the white middle classes].”⁴²

Frances Armstrong herself took special care to ensure that her husband did not come into contact with domestic chaos. When moving into their new home in Grahamstown, she “persuaded the Bp. [Bishop] not to come home for two or three nights as I feared the wretchedly uncomfortable,

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p.326

⁴² Stoler, Ann L. “making empire respectable: the politics of race and sexual morality in 20th-century colonial cultures.” *American Ethnologist* 16 (4) (November 1989), p. 649

unsettled state of the house might make him ill.”⁴³ As the Bishop’s wife, Mrs. Armstrong was expected to carry out various social duties and to receive her husband’s colleagues and parishioners. A few weeks after her arrival in Grahamstown, she complained of being “very bad with my boil and face ache” but “felt obliged nevertheless to go to the grand tea party at the school in honour of our arrival.”⁴⁴ Thus while her husband may not have always recognised it, Mrs. Armstrong did identify herself as a dutiful wife and homemaker, and was eager to maintain and protect this role, especially as it pertained to her husband’s ‘civilizing’ work amongst Africans. The relationship between white women and domesticating the frontier was as clearly mapped out for her as it was for her husband. On visiting St. Luke’s mission station, she observed, “There being no lady or English women on the station, it was in a very rough state and our hut was not very inviting.”⁴⁵ Owing to the significance she invested in her identity as a homemaker, as well as her upper-middle class position and her location in an established town, she did not really have to confront the uncertainties and challenges of the frontier, and suffered no resulting crisis of identity.

Residing in a town during the second half of the nineteenth century could not protect Harriet Rabone from a crisis of identity. She was in many respects a conventional woman, who took pride in the fact that she could cook, “half a sheep, every day, besides vegetables, and then not

⁴³ Matthew Grahamstown Diocese, p.52

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p.54

⁴⁵ Matthew Grahamstown Diocese, p.80

use a quarter of the wood” in her small Dutch oven.⁴⁶ Harriet nevertheless expressed deep frustration at her domestic confinement. She loved to read and anticipated parcels of books sent to her from England with great excitement, “I get plenty of books to read, and always find a little time for them. I have no notion of giving up one of the purest and greatest pleasures. I would rather let my dresses get rusty than my mind.”⁴⁷ Clearly Harriet had to make some effort to find the time to read after her household chores had been completed. Despite the fact that she felt so passionately about reading for her own pleasure, she still felt the need to justify herself by adding, “I read all that Alfred [her brother] and William [her husband] read so that neither are at a loss for conversation.”⁴⁸ Reading for her own enjoyment seemed selfish and indulgent to Harriet’s Victorian mind, so by convincing herself she read to be a better conversationalist for her husband and brother she was able to make her love of reading acceptable to herself and others.

In a later letter to Agnes, Harriet complained of the vacuous, boring visitors she had to endure, and confided, “Will you believe it - I dare not let my acquaintances know half the books I read, lest they should entirely lose respect for me as a housekeeper? Is it not hard?” This was a woman who did live beyond the boundaries of home and domesticity, and who expressed conflicting feelings of guilt and relief at her escape. Most settler women religiously catalogued lists of callers and associated these visitors with social prestige. Harriet was bored by her guests,

⁴⁶ Rabone Records, p.103

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p.99

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p.99

but at the same time they made her feel inadequate as an English 'lady',

You know I am not good with conversations on dress, and if I admire an expression of countenance or anything of the kind, it is thought *peculiar*, and I feel I am not understood one bit, and descend immediately into some commonplace. Servants are the grand topic, but having a little English child of 11 as my only help, and who can scarcely be called a servant, in their sense of the word, for she *loves* me, and I allow her as much freedom from servanism as I can! I have not all the dreadful bothers to relate that they have, and I often wish my callers would go - I find it so troublesome to entertain such people.⁴⁹

Harriet Rabone struggled between her desire to be socially acceptable, and her irritation and scorn toward society and its demands. As a settler woman living in a small town (Graaff-Reinet), her opportunities for exploring an alternative, more diverse life were circumscribed. Her letters reveal her as a woman who privately challenged the stereotype of Victorian womanhood, and at the same time found a degree of contentment and self-fulfilment in meeting this challenge, as well the hardships that her life as a settler woman entailed.

Harriet Rabone was not the only settler woman to feel stifled by her domestic responsibilities. Mrs. Stormont, who lived at Lovedale with her missionary husband, wrote in her journal just after New Year, 1894,

The day was dull and cold. I am sorry to say I read nothing during its course, having been busy all day, in assisting others or myself. But a new leaf must be turned to. The New Year was to have that new leaf but alas! It is three days old already and only 'light literature' has been my fare. As I cannot exist on this mentally, I must change my diet. Something bracing and serious must be introduced: but what? I have an idea, the realisation of which would give me the requisite time for study, even although the household duties are numerous and tedious, but that plan I will not disclose even to my

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p.107

journal, as I am afraid it will turn out a failure.⁵⁰

Study and reading, especially material other than 'light literature', are not occupations associated with Victorian women. However, although some women like Harriet Rabone and Mrs. Stormont rejected any purely domestic definition of themselves, the extent to which this was brought about by their location on the frontier is questionable.

Another aspect of settler women's frontier experiences that reflects some of the conflicts they faced, can be found in their responses to their physical surroundings. The massive spaciousness and expansiveness of the South African landscape was often commented on by travelling women, but this aspect of their surroundings also frightened and overwhelmed many women. Mary Elizabeth Barber (nee Bowker) wrote of the monotony of the landscape on an ox-wagon trip she took to Cape Town in 1879, "After travelling the plains in comparative loneliness for many days, it is a relief to come suddenly upon these little district towns. With respect to Victoria [the town], there is something homelike and respectable about its general appearance."⁵¹ For Mrs. Barber, the untamed wilderness that surrounded her symbolised all that was uncivilized and uncultivated; the little town represented European triumph over this barbarism. Seeing the town undoubtedly reassured Mrs. Barber, whose faith in white domination was obviously shaken by the vast, unshaped African countryside that was not under European control.

⁵⁰ Mrs. Stormont, 3 January 1894

⁵¹ Mary Barber, p.39

The split between the uncontrolled natural world versus human-imposed order and technology, is affirmed by a later comment, made after the travelling party caught sight of the railway system, “At length the light dawned upon us: we were approaching civilization, and the pegs were railway pegs: we were leaving the wide plains of solitude and barbarism behind, together with the creatures that inhabit them.”⁵² The association of railways with familiar civilization is echoed in a remark made by another colonial woman, Katherine Harris, whose experience of the flight from Lucknow (a region of India) in 1858, is the subject of an essay by Alison Blunt. After being evacuated from the besieged Lucknow and embarking a train bound for a safer destination, Harris wrote, “it seemed delightfully home-like and natural to be once more on a railroad.”⁵³ Not only did railways represent progress and Western innovation, they were emblematic of ‘home’ in the midst of the wilderness. Incidentally, Mrs. Barber was a botanist, “remarkable for her vast and accurate knowledge of the plant and insect life of South Africa,” making her rejection of the veld and her association of the natural countryside with “barbarism” all the more surprising.⁵⁴ Her feelings also suggest the sense of isolation and loneliness that colour so many settler women’s diaries and letters.

Not all women reacted to the South African landscape with as much antipathy as Mrs. Barber. On

⁵² Mary Barber, p.43

⁵³ Harris, Katherine quoted in Blunt, Alison “The Flight from Lucknow: British women travelling and writing home, 1857-58.” in Duncan, James and Gregory, Derek (eds) Writes of Passage: Reading Travel Writing. London and New York: Routledge, 1999, p.104

⁵⁴ Mitford-Barberton, Ivan and Raymond The Bowkers of Tharfield. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952, p.28

a trip to the diamond fields in 1871, Eliza Jane Dugmore (then eighteen years old), opted to walk alongside the wagon so as to have a better view of her surroundings, “Emily [Eliza’s sister] and I preferred walking as we could better see the scenery; it is well worth seeing, though I will not say, as I heard an English lady once say, that ‘it is the only thing in South Africa worth seeing.’”⁵⁵ In spite of her apparent openness to her surroundings, when her father insisted that his family move from their farm on the Koonap River to live in the remote Albania area, Eliza was devastated at not being able to “return to the Colony to live.”⁵⁶ Of her new home, she wrote somewhat bitterly,

This morning I was not particularly prepossessed with the appearance of this country. Our tent is pitched under a large camel thorn [tree] close to the dam. There are not many trees about. Our tent faces South. On our left is a ridge of stony hills dignified by the name of Vetberg.⁵⁷

Clearly, the wild countryside did not hold the appeal it did for Eliza when she was merely travelling through it. When she was expected to live in this environment permanently, away from the familiar, ordered, safe Colony, she felt alienated and angry. Eliza died at the age of twenty two, a mere four years after her unhappy move to Albania. Her circumstances illustrate the extent to which patriarchal control was still firmly in place in the 1870s. In spite of the fact that she was eighteen years old, and loathe to move to a remote, alien environment, she felt compelled to obey her father’s command that she accompany her family there.

⁵⁵ Eliza Dugmore, Wednesday 25 October 1871

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, Tuesday 28 November 1871

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, Tuesday 28 November 1871

When Frances Armstrong and her family first arrived in South Africa, they spent a few days in Cape Town before travelling on to Algoa Bay, and then to Grahamstown. Of her pleasant stay in Cape Town, Mrs. Armstrong wrote, “Delightful as our visit has been I find little to say about it, it was too delightfully English to give much matter for remark.”⁵⁸ By 1854, Cape Town was an established colonial centre, and was certainly firmly under British control. It presented the newly arrived Englishwoman with none of the uncertainties or challenges of the frontier. In fact, as shown by some of Mrs. Armstrong’s remarks quoted earlier, Grahamstown was also comparatively secure and dominated by a British ethos in 1854. Another new arrival to Cape Town in 1855, Harriet Bowe, remarked that she was “quite agreeably surprised with Cape Town.”⁵⁹ She spent her few days in the city shopping, having her hair cut and going for scenic drives, which were certainly not activities associated with the frontier. Later in her diary she described her life on a farm, ‘Drayton’, near Caledon, where she felt very keenly her isolation and the hardships of farm life, although at the time of her writing, the Caledon district was not on the frontier. Settler women who dwelt on isolated farms often expressed hostility toward their surroundings, and their writing reflects a sense of being trapped by their environment, whereas women who lived in towns, seem fascinated and enthralled by the South African landscape, which they admired for its exotic beauty. Otherness it seems, was only palatable in small, controlled doses that could be construed as romantically foreign and wild, rather than dangerous and threatening to white identity and domination. The contrast in women’s reactions to the

⁵⁸ Matthew Grahamstown Diocese, p.34

⁵⁹ Harriet Bowe, 24 January 1855

environment is closely bound up with the loneliness of farm life and the sense of vulnerability this produced, which will be addressed in chapter four.

Hostility towards the environment and efforts to gain mastery over the landscape are recurrent themes in the writings of settler women. Subjugation and control were an implicit part of the colonial enterprise, and this is reflected in descriptions of landscape in which Europeans constructed a “fantasy of dominance.”⁶⁰ The language used by white women in their representations of their frontier surroundings confirms that one of their self-sanctioned roles was to tame and order the chaos of the frontier. In her analysis of imperial travel writing, Pratt highlights how European travellers in Africa, or other equally ‘exotic’ locations, often described the landscape they encountered in a manner that mirrored their desire for conquest. She argues that,

In this kind of writing [travel writing], the “face of the country” is presented chiefly in sweeping prospects that open before or, more often, beneath the traveler’s eye . . . The eye “commands” what falls within its gaze; the mountains “show themselves” or “present themselves”; the country “opens up” before the European newcomer, as does the unclothed indigenous bodyscape.⁶¹

Thus, by adopting an elevated stance, and describing the panoramic view that lay beneath her, the settler woman could present herself as mistress of all she surveyed. Landscapes featuring mountains were favoured for this reason. Frances Armstrong, for example, wrote from the

⁶⁰ Pratt, Mary Louise “Scratches on the Face of the Country; or, What Mr. Barrow Saw in the Land of the Bushmen.” in Gates, Henry Louis Jr. (ed) ‘Race’, Writing, and Difference. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1985, p.143

⁶¹ *Ibid*, p.143

summit of the Amatola mountains, “The scenery was magnificent, the Amatola basin in the distance and beautiful thick bush and low hills in the foreground.”⁶² Her language suggests not only the wildness of the scenery - “beautiful thick bush” - but also her command of the terrain. The use of the word “distance” implies her heightened position as she gazes down from her lofty mountain top, and thus affirms her position of authority as a European in Africa.

Landscape descriptions also reveal the transformation of the unknown and unfamiliar into something predictable and customary, as another aspect of women’s frontier function. Mrs. Armstrong’s portrayal of the Amatola mountains is followed by a further remark, “The road was tolerably good in itself (a fine rich black soil suggesting rhododendrons etc. etc. for the gardens of future settlers).”⁶³ Upon surveying an ‘empty’ landscape, the settler self in Mrs. Armstrong was activated into projecting the gardens, planted with English flowers, of future white inhabitants. In spite of her apparent admiration for the East Cape scenery, she views this environment mainly for its potential to accommodate the needs of future English immigrants. In her imagination, these English settlers were already established with their rhododendron gardens, and by focusing on the triumph of colonialism, and the changes its rule inevitably heralded, Mrs. Armstrong was able to assert her domination of her surroundings.

This reinforced by another observation she made about a flower she picked, a “curiously marked

⁶² Matthew Grahamstown Diocese, p.70

⁶³ Matthew Grahamstown Diocese, p.70

yellow orchid which I think I have seen in hot houses in England.”⁶⁴ The orchid’s strangeness was tempered by its previous appearance in an English hot house. Soon after her arrival in South Africa, Sarah Childs made a similar remark, “the bushes, shrubs and wild plants are lovely in the extreme. Many of them I have seen at Kew Gardens at home.”⁶⁵ Here too, the foreign was rendered familiar by connecting it with ‘home’ and civilization. On the same journey that this comment was made, Sarah also lamented, “Seems grievous to see such beautiful country uninhabited.”⁶⁶ In a single sentence she summed up the entire settler ambition to colonize, to populate, to take possession of the countryside and convert its energies into commercial products.

The colonial project was certainly one in which women played a central role, albeit one that focused less on commercial enterprise and political activity, and more on *domesticating* the frontier by imposing their identities as Englishwomen, inscribed with the cultural values and ideals of their time, onto the physical, political, economic, social, cultural and human landscape of the Eastern Cape. Refinement, decorum and respectability were cornerstone Victorian values which settler women attempted to maintain and advance on the frontier, by resisting change and eliminating diversity. Neither settlers in general, nor settler women in particular *adapted* to the Eastern Cape as the settlerist school have tended to suggest. Instead, settlers endeavored to remain exactly the same, and to oppose adaptation wherever possible. The implications of this role for settler women, and the manifestations of its complex tensions, are explored in the

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p.66

⁶⁵ Sarah Childs, p.16

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p.16

following chapters.

3. FEAR AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF RACISM

The most striking aspect of the racial discourse to be found in settler women's writing is its close resemblance to the racist language of South Africa that persists today. Stereotypes of Africans as lazy, libidinous, dirty, thieving, and stupid were born on the frontier, where African and European interests clashed most directly, and where whites perceived their identity to be continually under threat. As the struggle for land, resources, political power and social domination wore on, so these stereotypes hardened into crude racist labels, serving to maintain and widen the imagined gulf between black and white. The evolution of the language and practice of racism is inseparable from the fear that characterised white responses to the frontier environment, however well disguised as bravado and confident white superiority. The extent to which white women were involved in this process is the subject of much debate amongst both feminist scholars and scholars of empire.

Settler women were identified by both their whiteness and their womanhood, and it is the relationship between these categories which is of importance. Interestingly, whiteness has historically been regarded as a given, rather than a racial category. Other races have been constructed in opposition to the standardized white model, while womanhood is a gendered identity, an Other to the standard white male convention. Thus white women straddle(d) an uncertain border, as part of the ruling elite due to their race, but subordinate to men within this governing group. At the same time, some scholars have identified the "inherent whiteness of 'true womanhood'", the notion that the idea of whiteness is in fact pivotal to the meaning of

womanhood.¹ This has enormous implications for settler women's identities, fashioned by their encounters with both men, and African women, who by this definition could never epitomise "true womanhood."

The intention of this chapter is to search for "significant moments in the past which . . . explain how this category [of white womanhood] was produced," and how this identity was articulated in settler women's writings.² Underlying this chapter, therefore, are the assumptions that race is an entirely artificial social construct, and the "need to perceive white femininity as a historically constructed concept."³ An added dimension to the race/ gender interface in the South African context, is the relationship between white English-speaking women, and their Afrikaans-speaking counterparts. The writings that this thesis is predicated on, focus on the views and experiences of middle-class English-speaking women. These women did not identify with Afrikaner women, whom they viewed as largely crass, unfeminine, aggressive and lacking refinement. Racist attitudes toward Afrikaners generally, and toward Afrikaner women in particular, served to reinforce and sustain English women's image of themselves as ladylike, genteel, dignified and cultivated.

The multifaceted meanings of white womanhood in the context of a racially charged frontier

¹ Brody, Jennifer Devere "Rereading Race and Gender: When White Women Matter." American Quarterly (48) (March 1996), p.154

² Ware, Vron Beyond The Pale: White Women, Racism and History. London and New York: Verso, 1992, p.2

³ *Ibid*, p.3

setting evolved over time, and should not be viewed as rigid and unchanging. For example, the development of a racist ideology can be traced by comparing the ideas expressed by settler women prior to their arrival in South Africa, with those formulated after they had been living on the frontier for some time. Such comparisons are a useful analytical tool for understanding how and why the racist attitudes held by settler women came into being. Examining the evolution of racist discourse and practice on the frontier tends to draw attention to conflict and competition, rather than to examples of co-operation between races. Inter-racial competition did not always serve the needs of either settlers or Africans. For white settlers, self-sufficiency and ultimately the creation of wealth and prosperity were their main goals. When racist ideology did not further these aims, it was frequently abandoned or modified. Fanon's focus on the "dynamism of colonial mercantilism" referred to at the beginning of this project, underscores this point. Racist ideology may have served important social and psychological functions, such as identity formation, but the overriding concern of the settler was to set in place a profitable capitalist system. All other needs and ideals were secondary to the drive for trade and profit, and as such had to be harnessed to serve capitalist interests.

Upon her arrival in Algoa Bay in 1854, Frances Armstrong wrote the following description of their landing in her diary, "our boat grazed the rocks with a somewhat uncomfortable quiver, and instantly we were beset by a crowd of Fingoes wanting to carry us on shore. Such fine noble figures I never saw, and their countenances too are strikingly intelligent."⁴ Notwithstanding her

⁴ Matthew, H.M. Grahamstown Diocese Historical Notes Volume 1. Grahamstown: Diocesan Office, 1957, p.37

use of the word “beset,” which is suggestive of being surrounded in a hostile manner, Mrs. Armstrong’s comments about the Africans she sees are positive and admiring, if somewhat patronising. This is in direct contrast to a remark she passed about three months later, while journeying into the interior of the Eastern Cape with her husband on church business. After meeting with an African chief who, according to Mrs. Armstrong, expressed eagerness to learn about European industrial farming methods, she commented, “It is to be feared that the Fingo character is not a noble one and the development it is capable of is in the line of money getting.”⁵ Apparently forgetting the vital connection between the Christian civilizing mission and the inculcation of the protestant work ethic, as well as the fact that the chief purpose for the European presence in Africa was for “money getting”, Mrs. Armstrong attacked the Fingo chief for embracing the very values Europeans were championing in Africa. The romantic ‘noble savage’ she first encountered on the shores of Algoa Bay, was been replaced by another racist conception of Africans as greedy and grasping.

A similar shift in racial attitude can be traced in the journal of Sarah Amm, who arrived in Algoa Bay in 1862. Immediately after landing in Port Elizabeth she observed,

There are numbers of black people. Kaffirs dressed in every variety of peculiarity, with all sorts of bright colours and rings and bracelets, others nearly as Nature made them. I never saw a finer race of people as regards their shape and bright in the face as all blacks look.⁶

However, after a few days she and her brother took an ox-wagon trip into the interior, where they

⁵ *Ibid*, p.78

⁶ Sarah Childs, Monday 29 September 1862, p.15

encountered, for the first time, the real foreignness of the frontier and its inhabitants. Sarah's reaction was markedly different from her initial fascination with the colourful, exotic Other, "The Kaffirs are a simple kind of race of people, and somehow they look like servants, a degenerate race that would be always satisfied with a lowly position."⁷ Perhaps exposure to the racist views of English settlers already living in South Africa altered Sarah's perceptions of Africans from initially open and positive, to scornful and condemning. Her second comment constructs the identity of her idealized African as "simple", "degenerate", "satisfied" and "lowly". By ascribing these qualities to Africans in her writing, Sarah attempted to make her portrait of the humble, abject black servant a reality, thereby erasing her fear at the prospect of Africans who were angry, less than satisfied at being dispossessed of their land, and unwilling to accept a "lowly position."

The reasons for the marked change in Mrs. Armstrong's views and impressions are closely related to her own changed circumstances. Stoler has noted that, "In colonial situations . . . increasing knowledge, contact, and familiarity lead not to a diminution of racial discrimination but to an intensification of it over time, and to a rigidifying of boundaries."⁸ As a newly-arrived English woman, Mrs. Armstrong could afford to hold open, enlightened attitudes toward Africans. They posed no threat to her self-image or to her physical well-being, and so she felt no need to relegate them to the realm of barbarism. Later, after she had travelled into the interior of the Eastern Cape, which was at that time (1850s) barely infiltrated by white settlers, she felt her

⁷ *Ibid*, p.16

⁸ Stoler, Ann Laura "Rethinking Colonial Categories: European Communities and the Boundaries of Rule." Comparative Studies in Society and History 31 (1) (1989), p.137

position as a woman, and as a *white* woman in particular, constantly undermined. Forced to live out of a wagon, eat strange food, mix with Africans and endure heat, mosquitoes, dust and other discomforts, all eroded Mrs. Armstrong's idealization of herself as an English lady. She compensated for this by condemning the Fingo character as ignoble, thereby buttressing her failing sense of self.

There is another way of explaining Mrs. Armstrong's and Sarah Childs' different views of Africans. Mrs. Armstrong's first description of the Fingo's "noble figures" and "intelligent countenances" draws on the tradition of the 'noble savage', which painted a romantic portrait of Africans as different to Europeans. In this depiction, Africans were exalted as brave and majestic, living simple lives in harmony with nature, unimpeded by excessive material possessions. This idealization was a by-product of primitivism, a school of thought that "asserts that in the modern world, the life, activities, and products of 'primitive' people - who are considered to live in a way more accordant to 'nature' because they are isolated from civilization - are preferable to the life, activities, and products of people living in a highly developed society, especially in cities."⁹ Whatever his virtues, emphasis on "his", for this figure was never female, the 'noble savage' was cast as primitive, backward and most importantly, the opposite of educated, refined whiteness. By emphasizing this dichotomy, Europeans could shun the process of civilizing Africans, by rendering the notion of civilization suspicious and even undesirable for Africans. Familiarizing Africans with European civilization could potentially erode the

⁹ Abrams, M.H. A Glossary of Literary Terms, Fifth Edition. Orlando: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc, 1985, p.148

differences between black and white, thereby revealing the artificiality of the racial divide in the first place.

Thus, when Mrs. Armstrong described the Fingo as “noble,” she was really underlining the vast differences she perceived between them. He was primitive, in touch with nature and his base instincts; she was sophisticated, worldly-wise and ruled by her higher faculties. She pretended to admire his qualities, and by so doing she was absolved of really having to engage with difference, let alone try to change him to be more like herself. Later, when a Fingo chief showed signs of sharing some of her own qualities, she condemned him as “money getting.” This is Othering at its crudest. Fearing greed in herself, Mrs. Armstrong projected this characteristic onto colonized Africans, making them detestable and dangerous. Europeans realised that ‘civilizing’ Africans would blur and diminish the categories of black and white, and so dilute the white supremacy upon which their political power was premised. This is confirmed by another of Mrs. Armstrong’s diary entries, in which she described a mission station and its semi-Westernised community,

the village was cold and most unpicturesque. The mud huts looked more like pictures of hovels than the compact mud beehives of the *genuine* kaffir, and the men in old corduroys and shabby wide awakes, did not contrast favourably with their *wilder* countrymen in the toga-like blanket. A black woman in a gown too, is not a pleasing sight. It made us long for some new invention combining the free grace of the savage with the decorum of the Xian.¹⁰ [Emphasis added]

Here, Africans who too closely resemble Europeans in their customs and habits, are criticised for not providing the visiting traveller with sufficiently exotic, romantic or picturesque sights. The

¹⁰ Matthew Grahamstown Diocese, p.84

association of “kaffir” huts with beehives reinforces the imagined link between ‘uncivilized’ Africans and nature. Mrs. Armstrong’s rejection of the black woman in a Victorian gown is most significant, as this represented the ultimate attack on her white womanhood.

If African-ness was felt to compromise the identity of white women, then one way in which these women attempted to disarm, or neutralise this hazard, was by reducing black women and men to children. There are countless examples in settler women’s writings where Africans are depicted as silly, giggling, impressionable, simple-minded children. Mrs. Stormont, a missionary at Lovedale, wrote of Africans and religious instruction,

As one might expect, only the very simplest of addresses, dealing with the most elementary parts of religion and morality, are what the Christian kaffir requires. The kaffir is but a child in everything and must be taught from the beginning. As in the case of children, is in that of the native, the teaching of abstract ideas is useless. Illustrations must be given, and these must be simple, and taken from their own lives, their habits and customs, with which they are familiar.¹¹

Unable and unwilling to contemplate the possibility of an educated ‘kaffir’ with whom she could engage as an adult, Mrs. Stormont is forced to cast Africans as incapable of sophisticated thought and therefore incapable of ever fully achieving equality with Europeans. Interestingly, her judgement of black women is more favourable. After attending the baptism of a black baby, brought by its mother, “a neat, tidy woman”, and in the absence of its father, she made the following diagnosis of relations between black men and women,

The men are more negligent and careless than the women. They don’t trouble so much about their duties and responsibilities as the women do. This is the result of their former habits, I suppose. The ‘red’ [non-Christian] kaffir does nothing but sit at his kraal door in

¹¹ Mrs. Stormont, 24 March 1894

the sun and smoke his pipe, while the wife (or wives) must go to the fields and work there, often with a child on her back. She has all the care, he has none.¹²

This statement can be dissected on several levels. Firstly, it can be read as a comment on the difference between the roles of black and white women in their respective spheres. Victorian women were viewed as almost entirely decorative and domestic, while African women played a vital economic role in food production in their societies. Whether or not Mrs. Stormont wished to play a more active role as a working woman, is purely speculative, although her decision to work as a missionary in a more or less remote part of Africa does indicate a certain degree of nonconformity on her part. It is possible that she was condemning irresponsible, unhelpful men in general - in which case she was conceding some common ground existed between white and black women. Most likely, she was attempting to demonstrate how dysfunctional and barbaric African society was before the arrival of Christianity, which sought to provide victims (such as women) and outcasts with solace and protection. Mrs. Stormont suggests that 'traditional' African societies were exploitative and oppressive, while white Christian societies are egalitarian and progressive. In reality, African women who converted to Christianity merely swapped one form of oppression for another, but by stressing the protection and comfort missionaries could offer these women, Mrs. Stormont legitimated and justified her presence in South Africa. In any case, her remarks reflect the interconnectedness of race and gender, and the difficulty of disentangling these connections.

Mrs. Stormont's comments about the moral superiority of black women are symptomatic of a

¹² *Ibid*, 24 March 1894

general trend amongst settler women, who tended to view themselves as having more in common with black women than black men. This sense of a shared bond, never approaching anything as conscious, political or sentimental as sisterhood, was rooted chiefly in the common identity of motherhood. The identity of both black and white women of the nineteenth century was centered on motherhood, and it was on this mutual experience that white women predicated their more favourable judgements of black women. In addition, white women felt less threatened by black women, who did not possess the sexual menace that their male counterparts were so potently endowed with. Johanna Moresby-White's 1886 travel journal entry illustrates this point, "Robert [her young son] and I went up to the location and he was delighted with the tiny goats & took some up in his arms & stroked them. He wanted to go inside all the kaffir huts but we only went to one and talked with the women."¹³ Although she felt confident to walk about the location with her son, Mrs. Moresby-White actively chose to only enter a hut where black women were present as the company of black women did not instil the same fear in her as that of black men. Mrs. Armstrong's focused her encounters with black women on issues of wifehood and motherhood. During her travels into the East Cape interior, she recorded the following episode,

After shaking hands with Umhalla [Xhosa chief] the children and I retired to make acquaintance with two of his nine wives, who accompanied him with a most hideous 'equerry'. The 'Tambookie wife' is really a rather pretty woman of rather an oriental indolent style. The son of the Tambookie wife is considered heir to the chief. The women greatly admired Johnny [her son] and seemed amused at my describing that I had two younger children than those present.¹⁴

Here Mrs. Armstrong highlighted matters that she perceived to be of common interest to her and

¹³ Johanna Moresby-White, p.15

¹⁴ Matthew Grahamstown Diocese, p.78

the black women she met, such as their marital status and their children. Aside from her interesting description of the “Tambookie wife” as “oriental” and “indolent”, her remarks demonstrate the imagined maternal connection between black and white women, a connection which undoubtedly shaped the racial perceptions of settler women.

The actual competition for land and resources, combined with the struggle on the part of the settler community to capture African labour, also coloured what white women thought and wrote about Africans. Many of their perceptions were grounded in a fear of actual physical attack or assault, combined with a fear of a compromise of identity. Recurring frontier wars heightened white fear, especially in the wake of farm attacks or cattle raids. The atmosphere of fear and mistrust that characterised the frontier is reflected in settlerist historiography. A sketch in 1820 Settler Stories depicts a black man standing over an anxious-looking mother and daughter. The story on the adjoining page explains how the black man captured the young daughter, mistakenly thinking he could marry her in return for ten oxen.¹⁵ This tale draws attention to the underlying anxiety amongst white settlers, especially with regard to black men, who were thought to be extraordinarily virile and an ever-present threat to the sanctity of white women.

Often settler women’s only interaction with Africans was in the capacity of the master/ servant relationship. Thus women frequently wrote of their black domestic servants, and also of the black farm labourers, with whom they had less contact. All the predictable stereotypes of the lazy worker and the thieving cook appear in these writings, serving to further reinforce the

¹⁵ Hudson-Reed, Sydney 1820 Settler Stories. Johannesburg: Macmillan, 1970, pp.120-121

writer's moral high ground and sense of besiegement. Mary Moffat wrote a letter to her family, complaining that her kitchen was separated from the main house, which prevented her from monitoring her servants, "If one turns one's back, perhaps half the food is gone, and spoon, knife, fork or whatever lies in the way."¹⁶ Anna Bowker wrote to her son Holden, sympathizing with him about the difficulty of finding satisfactory servants, "All the Blacks are lazy, so your woman must be like the others - that is all they know."¹⁷ In this way of thinking, all Africans are reduced to a homogenous, monolithic category of servants (the ubiquitous 'they'), about which crude generalisations can easily and glibly be made. These generalisations become a language in which the colonizers can converse with each other, convincing each other that they really know and understand 'their native.' In other words, by reducing Africans to these knowable, recognisable, dehumanised images, the white settler was able to assert her control and authority over the colonized races. Rather than remaining disturbingly foreign, impenetrable, exotic and unknown, African-ness could be rendered predictably unreliable, disloyal, lazy and thieving.

The image of the frozen, dehumanised, and by implication, manageable African reaches grotesque and exaggerated proportions in a description by Mary Bowker of her visit to the Robben Island lunatic asylum, as it was then called. Describing the inmates as happy "in a vegetative sort of way," she went on to report that a "kaffir", who was clearly catatonic, reminded her of a "huge succulent plant," and that, "if some exasperated, thrice ruined frontier farmers had seen this kaffir, they would have exclaimed, 'Oh that they were all as good and quiet

¹⁶ Mary Moffat, p.27

¹⁷ Anna Bowker, 14 July 1860

as he is.’ ”¹⁸ For Mrs. Bowker, it would have been preferable for all Africans to be silent, immobile and scarcely alive. This would have at least put a stop to their raids, insolence, and threatening presence. Victorian attitudes toward mental illness aside, this comment is extreme in its attempt to strip blackness of its perceived menace, revealing just how vulnerable and fearful settler women felt. The total absence in some settler women’s writing of any references to Africans, testifies to this vulnerability and the accompanying desire to somehow obliterate the cause of this fear, if only in language.¹⁹ By simply writing Africans out of their diaries and thus their lives, they were able to deny the real feelings of loss of identity and erosion of personal safety that African-ness implied.

In spite of the serviceability of racism in terms of its ability to maintain the safe social and psychological divisions so valued by white settlers, if this racist ideology clashed with the principles of capitalism and good business, it was pragmatically shelved to pave the way for trade and profits, or “colonial mercantilism.” For instance, in a letter to her son John, Anna Bowker advised him to let his farm to whomever could pay rent, regardless of their race, “I would let it to Fingoes. A Fingo’s money is as good as a white man’s.”²⁰ Mrs. Bowker’s notions of racial superiority did not allow her to lose sight of the pioneer’s ultimate goals of survival and prosperity. Many white settlers were dependent on trade with Africans for their income, and this dependance sometimes provoked feelings of resentment and even indignation amongst their

¹⁸ Mary Bowker, p.63

¹⁹ The letters of Mary Oertel are an example of this complete omission of Africans.

²⁰ Anna Bowker, undated card addressed to “Dear John”

ranks. In 1886, Johanna Moresby-White and her husband Ted took an ox-wagon trip into the East Cape interior, where they hoped to sell “kaffir corn” to Africans living there. The trip was not a great success, as Mrs. Moresby-White reported in her journal,

We outspanned close to the church, and Ted hoped to see a lot of Kaffirs coming to church on Sunday and therefore selling [sic] a lot of his corn. He spoke to them and hoped to do business with them on Monday, but they all seemed well supplied, and were very independent and inclined to be “cheeky.”²¹

The self-reliance of Africans who did not need the Moresby-White’s corn only served to underscore the dependance of this family on trade with those whom they viewed as naturally inferior. By failing to submit to the will of the white settler, the Africans subverted the accepted order of things, creating a tension in Mrs. Moresby-White which she resolved by reading self-sufficiency as cheekiness. This extract also demonstrates the interconnectedness of Christian mission work and the frontier economy. The church not only provided its members with the Christian message, but also provided a meeting place where commercial transactions could be negotiated. In her journal, Mrs. Moresby-White also noted with some surprise and irritation, “The one kaffir we sold corn to was the owner of 700 sheep.”²²

In spite of the seemingly rigid racial barriers on the frontier, there was a degree of interracial co-operation, such as that between John Bowker and the Fingo tenant his mother suggested to him. There was almost certainly some interracial mixing, although for most settler women, to have written about this would have been to concretize a phenomenon that was so threatening and

²¹ Johanna Moresby-White, p.15

²² *Ibid*, p.15

fearful, that they barely possessed the language with which to describe it. Nevertheless, there is an interesting reference in Harriet Bowe's journal. She and her extended family lived on a farm near Caledon in the 1850s. Her diary entry for 24 April 1855 reads, "Susannah [her coloured servant] confined with a (white) boy - quite unexpected, about 10pm."²³ Whether her surprise was at the baby being white, or at his time of arrival, the mention of this event reveals that interracial mixing did occur, and that Mrs. Bowe was aware of this. By permitting this hybrid baby into her consciousness, she acknowledged the permeability, and thus the artificiality of the division between black and white, a divide which most of her settler compatriots regarded as a given.

In her "Dear Agnes" letters, Harriet Rabone's comments on racial matters highlight her general disregard for societal norms and "received patterns of respectability."²⁴ In 1861, she wrote, "I have not the slightest disgust to blacks, or browns, can touch them, nurse them, and get on very well with their race."²⁵ In spite of this apparent openness to racial mixing, Harriet added, in the same letter, that she would never enjoy teaching natives, "'Teaching the Natives' is just *the* thing I could not do. Anything else, but not that!"²⁶ She referred to "these semi-barbarous natives", and also expressed her joy at finding a "genuine English servant" who "knows how to do

²³ Harriet Bowe, 12 April 1855

²⁴ Hansen, Karen Tranberg "White Women in a Changing World." in Chaudhuri, Nupur and Strobel, Margaret Western (eds) Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1992, p. 247

²⁵ Rabone, Arthur (ed) Records of a Pioneer Family. Cape Town: Struik, 1966, p.123

²⁶ *Ibid*, p.123

everything and does it too.”²⁷ Harriet’s eclectic views on race are an indication of the fact that racial ideologies were seldom homogenous. It would be misleading to characterise the East Cape frontier as virulently racist in every respect.

A particular kind of racial discourse that proliferates in settler women’s frontier accounts, is what Pratt calls “manners-and-customs descriptions.”²⁸ In the journal of Sophia Beddoe, for example, the following anecdote is recorded, after it was related to her by a member of the Bowker family, for whom she worked as a governess,

In the case of an ox dying near a roadside, every native who passes cuts off some portion with his knife, and when all the flesh has been consumed, natives have been seen to wind the entrails round their bodies, and pursue their journey eating as they walk.²⁹

Not only does this description suggest the barbarism of the “native”, it also frames his activities in “a timeless present tense, which characterizes anything ‘he’ is or does not as a particular historical event but as an instance of a pre-given custom or trait.”³⁰ The ideological significance of the “normalizing discourse” of the manners-and-custom description in a frontier environment is outlined by Pratt,

nowhere are the notions of normal, familiar action and given systems of difference in greater jeopardy than on the imperial frontier. There Europeans confront not only unfamiliar Others but unfamiliar selves; there they engage not just in the reproduction of

²⁷ *Ibid*, pp.122, 121

²⁸ Pratt, Mary Louise “Scratches on the Face of the Country; or, What Mr. Barrow Saw in the Land of the Bushmen.” in Gates, Henry Louis Jr. (ed) ‘Race’, Writing, and Difference. Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1985, p.139

²⁹ Sophia Beddoe, p.43

³⁰ Pratt “Scratches”, p.139

the capitalist mode of production but its expansion through displacement of previously established modes. It is no accident that, in the literature of the imperial frontier, manners-and-custom description has always flourished as a normalizing force and now retains a kind of credibility and authority it has lost elsewhere.³¹

In their efforts to render the “unfamiliar Other” more stable and predictable, thereby reducing the destabilization of their own identities, settler women favoured the type of description that Pratt has analyzed. When European customs clashed directly with African ones, white settler women were quick to emphasize the division between black and white, lest it become blurred. In a telling example, Mrs. Stormont commented on the headdress of African women attending a church service,

A few girls - young women - wore hats, but the majority wore the usual kaffir turban arrangement on their heads, which is usually formed of black or red cloth twisted fantastically round their heads. Some say it is in imitation of the European hat, but I think it is only used as a protection against the sun, for the heathen or ‘red’ women wear the same headdress, but of a brick red, terra cotta colour.³²

A tension is evident in the writer. She did not wish to allow for the possibility that “kaffir” women could wear hats in the same manner as Europeans. The “usual turban” was sufficiently exotic enough to maintain the division between Self and Other, and so she deduced that the turban was only used for practical reasons of sun protection. However, as a missionary, it was Mrs. Stormont’s job to convert Africans not only to Christianity, but to European customs and lifestyle. Underlying the civilizing mission was a contradiction between the wish to replace the indigenous economy, customs and social structures with European ones, and the simultaneous

³¹ Pratt, “Scratches”, p.140

³² Mrs. Stormont, 24 March 1894

maintenance of the social and psychological split between colonized and colonizers.

Consequently, the ideology of the frontier cannot be said to be homogenous or monolithic, and the colonizers themselves were certainly plagued by internal divisions and strife.

An instance of this internal conflict is unwittingly revealed by Mary Bowker, as she describes being forced to travel in a third class (read black) railway carriage,

On arriving at the Umgeni station we had a row with the railway people who turned us out of the first class carriage in which we had travelled in the morning, and attempted to put us into a third class one which had lately been appropriated by natives, consequently its atmosphere was by no means scented by the fragrant gales of 'Araby the blest'. Our remonstrances against this treatment were all in vain. It was a clear, cruel case of oppression, the strong against the weak.³³ [Underlining in original]

Mary Bowker's sense of entitlement and white ladyhood was affronted by the railway clerk's insistence that she and her party travel with unpleasant smelling natives. The fact that she experienced this incident as "a clear, cruel case of oppression" is ironic, since she was oblivious to her own position as an oppressor, and instead viewed herself as a victim of white-on-white persecution.

If fear was a characteristic response of white women to the frontier, then what implications did this have on relations between men and women, given that one of the roles assigned to white men was to protect their women? Mention has been made of the masculine nature of the imperial endeavour, but the extent to which white men were able to realize their 'manhood' on the frontier, has not yet been fully elucidated. Tosh argues that conditions in nineteenth century

³³ Mary Bowker, p.110

Europe began to see the erosion of traditionally male arenas, for example through the growing number of women in the workplace. As a result, popular male support for imperialism began to grow. He contends that, “A hearty, and above all a physical identification with the quintessentially masculine ethos of empire was one very effective way in which that slur [on manhood] could be countered.”³⁴ For settler men living on the frontier, their relationship with the masculine ethos of imperialism went far beyond a “physical identification.” These men were able to pour their masculine energies into the practical business of supporting their families by contending with the harsh frontier environment, and protecting white women against the perceived threat of the Black Man.

This masculine identity and mission was not created and sustained exclusively by white men, as white women’s constructions of themselves went a long way in fashioning the guardian role assumed by their men. Two examples support this claim. In her journal detailing her family’s trading trip into the interior, Johanna Moresby-White recounted the following episode,

Just as we had all settled down for the night, Ted [her husband] turned up. He did not like the idea of leaving us all alone with the wagons, and I was very glad he came as I felt rather nervous, altho’ there was really nothing to be frightened about.³⁵

In spite of telling herself that there was no cause to be afraid, Mrs. Moresby-White was fearful, and relieved when her husband anticipated this fear and arrived to take up his role as protector and defender. This interaction surely led to a reinforcement and rigidifying of traditional gender

³⁴ Tosh, John “What Should Historians do with Masculinity? Reflections on Nineteenth-century Britain.” History Workshop Journal 38 (1994), p. 194

³⁵ Johanna Moresby-White, p.18

roles, thus further polarizing men and women's identities. Similarly, when a drunk black man entered her house in her absence and "frightened the servants and Phil" [her young son], Ellen Case accepted the man's apology, but referred the incident to her husband. She recorded the confrontation in her diary verbatim, and the black man's fragmented English only served to further underscore the power Ellen exerted over him,

I said if we had come in and found him there, he would probably be in the trunk [prison] by now - he said "yes." Then I told him to be very careful and not take too much drink again etc. He listened quietly and seemed sorry. I said that as he had come to say he is sorry that Philip [Ellen's husband] would forgive him I thought - but he must never come here again in that state or he would be put in prison. He said "me come again on Monday and speak to minister."³⁶

The incident is recorded in such a way that reflects "the Other's amenability to domination"³⁷ and Ellen was thereby able to extinguish any threat that the drunken man may have posed to her pristine white womanhood. In addition, as a woman, she was placed in the unlikely situation of being able to wield authority, and fully embraced this role for herself. The black man was "quiet" and "sorry", while she, with the implicit backing of her absent husband, played the magnanimously forgiving mistress.

Writing about Africans as compliant and co-operative, even in awe and admiration of white womanhood, provided settler women with a means of diffusing the fear that Africans represented and determining their identities within their own social hierarchy. Racism, in other words, "created an opportunity for white women to maintain their identity as virtuous while ascribing

³⁶ Ellen Case, Friday 25 August 1893

³⁷ Pratt "Scratches", p.139

the image of immorality to women of color. In a colonial context, their moral superiority could justify white rule.”³⁸ In several settler women’s texts, black women were depicted as variously child-like, ingratiating, noisy, and generally indecorous. A passage from Mrs. Armstrong’s travel journal describing an encounter at a mission station is symptomatic,

Just when they [African women] were all going away one of them asked me for a needleful of strong thread to string her beads and I got Agnes Halsey’s large needle case to give it; when they saw the needles they were full of curiosity, so I threaded one and mended some holes in their blankets etc. which quite enchanted them. They shrieked with joy, and were all anxious for needles.³⁹

This incident can be viewed as a microcosm of the entire colonial enterprise, whereby the Other is introduced to European customs and values, in this case the needle, symbolic of the prudent Victorian domesticity embodied by the English lady. The underlying assumption that propels this enterprise is that the colonized people have been rescued from a life of ignorance and heathenism by the knowledge-bearing colonizers. The tone of Mrs. Armstrong’s writing is distinctively self-congratulatory, and the fact that her sewing lesson was so warmly received legitimates her position in South Africa, as well as bolstering her identity as a Victorian lady. The use of the word “shrieked” to describe the women’s response suggests a childish lack of control on their part, which is implicitly contrasted to Mrs. Armstrong’s own restrained, genteel composure, in addition to reinforcing the extent to which the women were amazed by Mrs. Armstrong’s lady-like accomplishments.

³⁸ Formes, Malia B. “Beyond Complicity Versus Resistance: Recent Work on Gender and European Imperialism.” *Journal of Social History*. 28 (Spring 1995), p.634

³⁹ Matthew *Grahamstown Diocese*, p.83

With little access to political or economic control within their own societies, the colonial frontier provided white women with an opportunity to exert a degree of influence. Stoler argues that,

In a context in which women's roles were severely limited and defined even more narrowly through their men than in Europe, it is not surprising that in the domain of sexual and domestic affairs these white women should have demanded exclusive rights and some modicum of control.⁴⁰

Hence Mrs. Armstrong's sewing lesson can be read as an example of this domestic control, and when Sophia Beddoe attended a party held by her Bowker employers, she wrote that, "A crowd of natives looked on and admired my dress and Emma's [her sister] dancing."⁴¹ The admiration displayed by the 'natives' secured Sophia's position of white womanhood, represented symbolically here by beautiful dresses and the feminine accomplishment of dancing.

Mobilizing the idea of African-ness as a foil for the maintenance and construction of their own identities was not the only form of Othering employed by white settler women. For the purposes of this study, only material written by English-speaking women has been selected. This is partly because after 1820, the frontier was dominated by whites of British origin, and partly because these English-speaking settlers adopted a strong group cohesiveness that has been employed historically for political purposes. It is precisely this group identity amongst the British settlers, and especially the gendered nature of this identity, that is under scrutiny in this study. Tensions between English- and Afrikaans-speaking settlers grew during the course of the nineteenth century, reaching a climax at the outbreak of the South African War in 1899. Although the period

⁴⁰ Stoler "Rethinking Colonial Categories", p.148

⁴¹ Sophia Beddoe, Thursday 12 July 1864

of the war lies beyond the scope of this study, some comments made by women at this time illustrate the kinds of ideas held by English-speaking women about their Afrikaner counterparts.

Fond of relating the anecdotes of her Bowker employers, whom she obviously regarded as experts on the behaviour of all indigenous frontier inhabitants, including wildlife, natives and Afrikaners, Sophia Beddoe repeated this tale in her 1864 journal, long before the outbreak of war,

Mr. Holden Bowker related one evening the following story of the war of 1846. A Dutch encampment was one evening attacked by a party of kaffirs who endeavoured to take the oxen and sheep from the kraals. The colonial Dutch, as a rule, are sad cowards; on this occasion, one Hans Friskop, receiving a slight wound, roared aloud and fled to the house, followed helter-skelter by his comrades. A little yellow-haired dame, who had no mind to lose her flocks and herds, seized a besom [broom], and therewith so soundly belaboured the flying troop that, finding the house too hot to hold them, they found it best to face the kaffirs, who were shortly repulsed. H.B. added that the Dutch women had repeatedly shown themselves braver than the men during the wars.⁴²

The tone of this extract is one of bemusement and faint admiration, although the vision of the “little yellow-haired dame” brandishing her broom-stick is absurd and demeaning, rather than admiring. The image certainly contrasts with that of the prim, decorous idealized Victorian lady, and Sophia’s recounting of the story suggests that the frontier did modify the gender roles of both men and women. Dutch women anyway, apparently exerted some control over their men, and men (like Holden Bowker) in turn recognised this power, although with great amusement. However, gender roles are affirmed by the broom-stick motif, suggestive of women’s domesticity, and an emblematic way of restoring this assertive’s women’s femininity. In other

⁴² Sophia Beddoe, Thursday 15 September 1864, p.44

words, in spite of the women's potentially unfeminine anger and actions, she was able to retain her essential feminine traits since the agent of her anger was the broom-stick. The story also draws a split between English- and Afrikaans-speaking men: the latter are "sad cowards", suggesting the bravery and manliness of the former.

The war-time antipathy between Boer and Briton is reflected in the venomous diary entries by English-speaking women, particularly those pertaining to Boer women. Writing to her sister during the Boer occupation of Burgersdorp, May Johnson was vehement in her racism,

Some of the Dutch females petitioned the Landrost the other day, to send the English right away to Delagoa Bay, but we're still here. I wish to goodness we weren't at times, but our things might have all been spoilt. One Dutch female was waiting for this house or Spanner's [neighbour], a widow with 5 or 6 dirty brats.⁴³ [Underlining in original]

In the language of this passage Mrs. Johnson clearly distinguished herself from Dutch women who were reduced to their biological label, "female", while she herself was a 'lady'. Their children were "brats", and the women were depicted as shrill, grasping, demanding hags. Inferior in every respect, this particular Dutch woman was even a husband-less widow. At other points in her diary (written in the form of a letter to her sister Hilda), Mrs. Johnson refers to Afrikaans as "their dirty language" and calls her Dutch neighbour "a wretch."⁴⁴ Interestingly, during the war, racial divisions between black and white were seemingly diminished as she co-opted the support of her 'native' servants, whom she viewed as morally superior to the Dutch. On Christmas Eve she wrote,

⁴³ May Johnson, 24 December 1899

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 7 March 1900

The most cheerful people here are the natives. Their absolute faith and patience is unwavering, they only ask us when the English soldiers are coming; with a smile 'it's all right.' My cook said she didn't want meat for Xmas dinner, but Dutchmen! They declare they are English in a ridiculous way, saying their colour is only sunburn.⁴⁵

Here the native is preferred to the impertinent Boer, since at least the native knows his place, and while he humbly awaits the arrival of his British saviours he self-sacrificingly declines such luxuries as meat. Then, in a somewhat ironic twist of logic, Mrs. Johnson criticizes the Dutch for being too similar to the 'natives' she has just praised for their "faith" and "patience." Anna Bowker, on the other hand, wrote in 1858, "We are surrounded by blacks and ignorant Du[t]ch - nasty horrid spitting fellows. I hate the sight of them. It makes me feel sick to see them coming."⁴⁶ Written long before the open hostility of war, this remark reflects a common stereotype of the ignorant, crass, coarse, churlish Boer. It is perhaps significant that Mrs. Bowker connected encountering the Other, in this case both Dutch and African, with feeling sick. As discussed in chapter five, illness on the frontier can be read as a response to the conflicting identities that white settlers were forced to negotiate.

The fear of an identity compromise, combined with the fear of actual physical attack created in white settlers the need for security and predictability, and diffusing the psychological threat of the Other was one way in which this could be achieved. Diaries and letters were an important space in which white women negated the menace of Africa and Africans. In their writing they were

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 24 December 1899

⁴⁶ Anna Bowker, 26 January 1858

able to construct images of Africans as child-like, docile, obedient or romantically exotic. These fantasies rendered blackness harmless and controllable. A sub-genre of this type of writing took the form of manners-and-custom discourse, in which the activities of Africans were reduced to a few static, recognisable stereotypes. Traditionally, these cast Africans as lazy, thieving, stupid, aggressive, dirty and over-sexed. This form of Othering enabled white settlers to know and normalise the 'native', and is symptomatic of their tendency to homogenize difference and diversity in the interests of creating a consolidated white community in a safe, predictable environment.

4. "THIS MISERABLE SOLITUDE"

Yet the thought of staying in this miserable solitude is dreadful: debarred from all social intercourse - not one female friend to converse with - no doctor within fifty miles - no clergyman or church in the whole country - no post office nearer than Graham's Town, which is a wretched place, and the road to it is terrible.¹

The expression of loneliness is one of the most powerful and meaningful themes that run through the diaries and letters of settler women. Women's frequent direct and indirect references to solitariness are most enlightening on several levels. Experiences of loneliness are a comment on every aspect of settler women's lives, including physical location, the time at which they were writing, class allegiances, racial attitudes and prejudices, need for or dislike of female friendships, the nature of their relationships with men, ability or inability to adapt to their environment, as well as the extent to which they accepted their civilizing position as white frontierswomen. A critical part of the frontierswomen stereotype is stoicism and courage. The ideal pioneer woman was presumably so consumed by the task of civilizing and improving, that she had no time to indulge in selfish feelings of loneliness, and if she did, she would stifle and eradicate these, as they may weaken and undermine the process of conquest and the identity of the settler group, which needed to appear brave, determined and cohesive. There is a deep rift between the icon of the stoic, heroic settler women, and the experiences and feelings articulated in these women's writings. The settler school has chosen to ignore or glibly gloss over these expressions of misery and solitude because they explode romantic colonial myths.

To admit that settler women were not always courageous and resilient, would be to accept the

¹ Anne Francis quoted in "A tale of two settlers." *The Settler* 66 (3) (1992), p.4

possibility that white women did not want to be part of the frontier, and by implication, did not want to be part of the colonial enterprise. This was not necessarily the case, as will be later demonstrated. Alternatively, some settlerist historians draw exaggerated emotive attention to the loneliness experienced by settler women in order to emphasize the difficulties they overcame in their struggle to civilize the frontier, thereby highlighting their ultimate victory. Whether, and to what degree, settler women felt isolated and alone are not the important questions here. What the descriptions of loneliness suggest, and what the various ways in which settler women negotiated their solitude reveal, are. The theme of solitude is not confined to women's writing, and part of its importance is that it transcended the gender division amongst whites and thus had a potentially unifying effect on that group. Whether this occurred in practice or not, can be deduced from the discussion on coping mechanisms deployed by settler women to alleviate their "miserable solitude."

The further away from home new settlers travelled, the greater their sense of isolation grew. Absolutely central to the need for friendship in settler women was the desire to interact with a like-minded person of their own race, language group, class and even gender. In the face of the bewilderingly strange and hostile frontier, with all the challenges it presented to the identity of a Victorian woman, a friend could provide more than mere companionship. White, middle-class, English-speaking women could affirm one another's faltering, threatened identities and attest to the innate cultural superiority of their collective character exemplified by respectability, Christian principles, deference toward men, self-sacrifice, domestic responsibility and so on. The expressions of loneliness in settler women's writing do not necessarily point to actual aloneness.

Frequently these references are a manifestation of cultural isolation and the need for a buttressing of identity, a mark of 'sameness' in another person. This process mirrors the Othering that white settlers practiced to distinguish themselves from black Africans. Women's remarks about their sense of solitude were closely linked to their need for 'home' and its associated comfort and familiarity. More than friendship, it was *familiarity* of people and place that settler women craved. Identity and the contestation of identity are the keys to understanding the apparent loneliness of settler women.

Alan Lester has traced the development of a coherent identity amongst the early British settlers of the Eastern Cape. Lester rightly shows that on arrival, the settlers of 1820 were anything but a homogenous, united group, "At its inception, the British settlement was riven by divisions."² Differences of class, gender, ethnicity and religion overrode any sense of group identity. All this changed after a few years of frontier life, as an "imperative for solidarity" caused settlers to construct a "shared and emotive British settler identity."³ As settlers began "to appreciate a shared vulnerability," so it became possible for them to unite around specific goals, the most important of which was capitalist expansion. Lester notes, "The settlers' initially divisive discourses of class, gender and nation were remoulded in the interests of solidarity, and solidarity was an imperative because capitalist penetration had its unwelcome counterpart in communal insecurity."⁴ The construction of a cohesive collective identity depended on several factors,

² Lester, Alan "Reformulating Identities: British settlers in early nineteenth-century South Africa." (1998), p.518

³ *Ibid*, p.515

⁴ *Ibid*, p.516

outlined by Crais, “Elites must share in a common perception of the landscape and have economic and social goals to which all aspire. And there must be an implicitly understood standard of behaviour and a sense of a common past.”⁵ Ultimately, this process was about the creation of a unified sense of ‘Britishness’ that could be compared and contrasted with another distinct group, with its own less favourable characteristics.

While settler women’s responses to Africans form the focus of the previous chapter, settler reactions to and representations of Africans were integral to the construction of their own identity. Race became the organising principle according to which settler identity was formulated. While settlers may have “initially viewed blacks with positive enthusiasm,” this perception did not last, as Crais explains,

A common perception of the landscape and shared social and economic goals required dispossession and the creation of a dependent class. Indeed, it was the development of agrarian capitalism and the protracted struggle over land and labour which accompanied it which initiated a fundamental change in the perception of the African in the colonial eye. Instead of a positive projection [at first the settler imagined him/herself “in the African”] there emerged a discourse of condemnation situated around a chain of signifying dichotomies: ‘white’ and ‘black’, ‘civilization’ and ‘barbarism’, ‘us’ and ‘them’, and so on.

As a result,

From the end of the 1820s Africans were increasingly represented as libidinous, uncontrolled, lazy and disrespectful of established authority. The settler, in turn, became what the African was not. In this topsy-turvy process the African became the ‘Other’. In the transition from an imaginary order - the settler ‘sees’ or imagines himself [sic] in the African - to a symbolic one, the Other emerged as a signifier around which a colonialist

⁵ Crais, Clifton The Making of the Colonial Order: White Supremacy and Black Resistance in the Eastern Cape, 1770 - 1865. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1992, p.128

discourse was born.⁶

This colonialist discourse cemented a *collective* settler identity of solidarity based on shared characteristics and a sense of group purpose, to civilize through cooperative effort. Solitude and isolation become all the more dangerous and anxiety-provoking for a society dependent on mutual support and reinforcement of the group identity. In the absence of other white women, negotiating the Otherness of the frontier landscape and its black inhabitants was made all the more difficult for settler women, rendering them vulnerable and insecure. Othering, which debarbed the threat of the unknown and the unfamiliar, involved a negation of the individual and is thus less comfortably achieved when not part of a collective. Thus, the theme of loneliness is less about a need for companionship, and more about settler women's vulnerability in the face of cultural isolation and the destabilising of identity that a solitary existence on the frontier entailed.

The quotation from a letter by Anne Francis (an 1820 settler) that opens this chapter illustrates the connection between loneliness and (in)ability to contend with the unfamiliar frontier. Mrs. Francis lamented the absence of the marks of civilization (doctor, clergyman, roads, post office) and complained of having "not one female friend." The alienating effect of a hostile frontier would have been easier to withstand had Mrs. Francis had the reassuring company of a white woman friend. Possibly, her identity as a 'civilized' English lady would not have been as radically disrupted if she had had a sense of group solidarity to fall back on. Similarly, Mrs. Ellen Case,

⁶ Crais *The Making*, pp.128-129

who came to live in South Africa in 1888, found her environment challenging and her sense of isolation added to that. When she, her husband (a clergyman) and their children arrived at the remote village of Tsolo, in what was later the Transkei area, she wrote in her diary,

We could not see our house etc. till we got over a lot of hills. Then suddenly we saw the church, our house, and 4 or 5 huts scattered on the side of the mountains, and when we got to the house we found we are surrounded by mountains all around. It is very pretty and grand here - but very lonely.⁷

The physical isolation of the landscape is reflected in the loneliness Ellen herself experienced.

During the duration of her stay in Tsolo, Ellen was unable to reconcile herself to its foreignness.

Church services were conducted in Xhosa, increasing Ellen's disorientation, "The first Kaffir service seemed strange to me. I must say a great sense of loneliness came over me the first evening . . . I felt fearfully homesick."⁸ Like Anne Francis, her loneliness was closely linked to the lack of civilization that surrounded her, "It is awful being so far from a doctor, shops, or a white friend."⁹ Owing to a hearing problem, Ellen's husband was not assigned parishes of his choice. He had to settle for small, poor, remote rural parishes. As a result, Ellen Case's diary makes frequent reference to her unhappy solitude. On her twenty-sixth birthday she wrote,

It has been a dull sort of day. No present, no good wish, or letters. Afterwards Philip [her husband] told me he tried to buy me a present at Mount Frere but could not see anything suitable, so I felt all right - to think he had remembered.¹⁰

Without an extended family or friends to help her celebrate the familiar birthday rituals, Ellen was left feeling alone and forgotten by those who mattered to her. Rudimentary,

⁷ Ellen Case, Thursday, 20 December 1888

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, Thursday, 14 March 1889

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Monday, 18 March 1889

unsophisticated shopping facilities prevented even her husband from buying her a gift.

Despite Ellen's professed loneliness, she did not embrace every opportunity of friendship. When, owing to her poor health, she and her family moved to Cradock in the 1890s, she complained in her diary, "We have any amount of callers here: too many. Butchers and store-keepers of all kinds call. Colonial people think all are equal. I believe if the Queen of England were to come to Cradock they would call on her!"¹¹ Ellen's sense of decorum and proper class distinction was unsettled by the more casual, relaxed social customs in Cradock. Her remark underscores the compulsion for maintaining strict racial, class and gender boundaries amongst settlers who perceived their identities to be compromised. Mrs. Case preferred to be lonely than to disrupt proper accepted social divisions.

Many women made the distinction between working class women and middle- or upper-class 'ladies', nearly always including themselves in the latter category. Upon embarking a ship bound for England, Johanna Moresby-White commented, "This ship is full of passengers, but hardly a lady was present at any meal. I was present at all meals."¹² This remark suggests not only that it was in some way unladylike to attend meals possibly because this demonstrated a healthy appetite or a strong constitution immune to seasickness, but also that Mrs. Moresby-White herself felt excluded from those she considered her social equals. Anna Maria Bowker (mother of Mary Elizabeth Barber and mother-in-law to Julia Eliza Bowker) wrote plainly of her dislike

¹¹ *Ibid*, 9 December 1893

¹² Johanna Moresby-White, Monday, 28 September 1889

of those whom she considered her social inferiors. Her previously cited indictment of Africans and Dutch underscores her rejection of those unlike herself as potential friends,

I shan't be sorry [to leave]. This country is an out-of-world place, and I shall be glad [if] God spares me to get amongst Christians again. We are surrounded by Blacks and ignorant Dutch - nasty horrid spitting fellows. I hate the sight of them. It makes me feel sick to see them coming.¹³

Traditional European festivals and rituals, marked and celebrated by settler women, also served as reminders of the real gulf, literal and metaphorical, between themselves and 'home'. The strangeness and loneliness of their environment were thrown into sharp relief by the intense familiarity of festivals such as Christmas. In her brief journal, Mrs. Stormont, a missionary who worked with her husband at Lovedale in the 1890s, wrote,

This is my second 'New Year's Day' at Lovedale . . . The morning was hot, but rain came on in the afternoon and lasted till late in the evening. Thus it seemed more like a Scotch New Year than an African one, with its burning sun and blue sky. Everything was very quiet and dull. We had only one visitor all day.¹⁴

Mrs. Stormont's description of the burning African sun is vaguely menacing. In her imagination, a 'real' New Year's Day should be cool and rainy, and filled with cheerful, jovial visitors. Once again, loneliness, "only one visitor all day", and the barren, inhospitable African landscape are connected in the settler woman's mind.

Distance from the main body of frontier settlement increased settler women's sense of isolation. Their bewildering environment was all the more challenging to come to terms with in the

¹³ Anna Bowker, 26 January 1858

¹⁴ Mrs. Stormont, 1 January 1894

absence of other white women to bolster their sense of self. After arriving in South Africa in 1855, Harriet Bowe, her husband and baby travelled by cart to their new home, a farm near Caledon. En route, Harriet was left at a hotel on her own for a day, “Rose early. Sunday. Talbot [brother-in-law] drove Tom [husband] in his covered cart to Cape Town to see about our luggage. Baby very fretful. Felt very solitary after their departure.”¹⁵ Although the Caledon area was, in the 1850s, well within secured white territory, Harriet was disturbed by her unfamiliar environment, particularly in the absence of her husband.

Martha Jane Webber spent most of her life trading in parts of the country unsettled by whites and beyond the reaches of the frontier. Her life-story is filled with references to solitude. While staying at a trading station, Plaatburg (in what was then Basutoland) in the early 1850s, Martha noted,

For three months or more we were entirely isolated, having no intercourse with the outer world whatever. During that time we never saw a *white* caller, as everyone shunned this part of the country, and although we were under Moshesh’s [Basuto chief] special protection, we had to put up with a great deal of impudence from the natives.¹⁶

The word “impudence” suggests mere mischievousness and belies Martha’s real fear of conflict with “the natives.” In fact, at the time she was living at Plaatburg, there were several clashes between Africans and white traders or settlers, and as a result, fear and loneliness are intricately bound up in Martha’s case, “It had been a most trying time for the little band of Europeans, cut

¹⁵ Harriet Bowe, Sunday, 28 January 1855

¹⁶ Martha Webber, p.19

off from all association with their own kind, in the midst of hordes of natives.”¹⁷ The threat of dangerous Africans is heightened by the insecurity of Martha’s isolated family.

The necessity of earning a living forced Martha and her family to trade with inaccessible, outlying communities seldom visited by other traders. She was of working-class origin and all her life struggled to survive on the frontier. Her socioeconomic position meant that she had no choice but to be constantly on the move, searching for potential trading customers. Never in one place long enough to form lasting friendships, and mostly travelling in areas uninhabited by white settlers meant a life of loneliness. This condition was also a reflection of Martha’s racial identity, which she sought to preserve by choosing not to befriend the black people whom she lived beside and traded with. Indeed, not only does she not befriend Africans, she refers to them as “hordes of natives,” a description reverberating with danger and impending invasion. By characterising all Africans as dangerous, “primitive in their ideas, and therefore not reliable,” and so on, Martha was able to justify her unwillingness to find companionship amongst the Other. Interestingly, although Martha identified blackness with cunning and malevolence on a collective level, she was less able to stereotype individual Africans in this way. She noted the company of “an old Hottentot woman we had”, a phrase uncomfortably suggestive of ownership, with whom she describes “sitting sewing late into the night.”¹⁸ Although this relationship between white settler woman and “Hottentot” servant was fraught with inequalities and prejudices, it appeared to provide Martha with some solace.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p.20

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.21

Settler women's loneliness was partly a result of their unstable physical environment, and partly a result of their casting as Victorian women. The Victorian gender ideology that confined women to the realm of 'hearth and home' was not embraced by all women. Many women became bored and frustrated in this narrow, repetitive role. This ennui is reflected in women's expressions of isolation. A striking, non-South African example is that of Flora Shaw/ Lady Lugard. As an unmarried woman, Flora Shaw worked as a journalist, eventually becoming the first female Colonial Editor of The Times. After marrying Lord Lugard, High Commissioner of Northern Nigeria in 1902, the new Lady Lugard went to live with her husband in Zungeru, a "tiny cantonment of half a dozen mud huts for as many British officers."¹⁹ Here she lived in virtual isolation, while her husband spent seven days a week working at his desk. Callaway and Helly explain, "Cut off from her previous colleagues and the London political scene in which she had played such a vital part, she had little to do each day except read and write letters."²⁰ In one of these letters, she confessed to a friend that she felt she was living "in solitary confinement."²¹ Shortly after arriving in Zungeru, she was sent back to England as a result of an undiagnosed illness.

While men spent their days in the public sphere, working and interacting with others, most

¹⁹ Callaway, Helen and Helly, Dorothy O. "Crusader for Empire: Flora Shaw/Lady Lugard." in Chaudhuri, Nupur and Strobel, Margaret Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992, p.89

²⁰ *Ibid*, p.89

²¹ Perham, Margery Lugard: The Years of Authority. London: Collins, 1960, p.79 (quoted in Callaway and Helly "Crusader", p.89)

women spent their days indoors carrying out banal domestic chores. Opportunities for contact with others were generally limited to children and servants, and although women called on one another, bad roads and long distances often prevented this. Wealthier middle-class women like Sophia Pigot could afford plenty of servants, freeing them from domestic monotony and enabling them to spend time paying social calls, although Sophia's social routine had its own tedium. Other women, such as Harriet Rabone, who worked as a teacher and gardener or Florence Brice, who served in the Ladies' Services in Kimberley during the South African War, were constantly engaged in work which they enjoyed, limiting their feelings of boredom and loneliness. The value of work as a coping mechanism will be addressed in chapter six.

While child-rearing may have provided women with some sense of purpose and staved off boredom, the daily mechanics of motherhood were often tedious and restrictive. Harriet Bowe is a case in point. The form of her curt, unemotional, repetitive journal reflected the pattern of her everyday life, which was monotonous, uneventful, lonesome. Her responsibilities as a mother prevented her from taking part in some of the activities of her husband, brother- and sister-in-law. A section from her journal reveals her habit of recording Tom's movements and projects, in a way that suggests she had no activities of her own to document,

4th Tom went to church. I remained at home with Baby, who was very poorly. Posted letter to Papa.

5th Talbot started for the strand.

6th The beans made their appearance.

And later that month,

25th Tom rode Punch to church. Remained at home with Baby.

28th Tom went into Caledon on Punch to post a letter to Mr. Hull. Received a letter from Mr. Orrick. Tom commenced painting house. Mary Ann [sister-in-law] purchased ducks.²²

After nearly two months of living at 'Drayton', Harriet wrote,

17th Talbot, Mary Ann and Ellen drove to Mr. Hoffman's. Tom rode Punch. I remained at home with Baby. Heavy rain fell at night.

18th Went into Caledon to church for the first time. Tom and Ellen remained at home with Baby.²³

As a central component of Victorian womanhood, motherhood was not a role easily shirked. In Harriet's case, her obligations as a mother often confined her to the house, while the rest of her family socialized or took part in community gatherings. Thus, prevailing gender roles inhibited Harriet's opportunities to find friendship. This was exacerbated by her location on an isolated farm.

Older settler women were especially prone to boredom. Such women seldom felt a sense of purpose, and spent their time seeking comfort from their families, especially their children. Mary Ann Oertel (born 1818) lived on a farm outside Graaff Reinet with her daughter Cath, and her family. She spent her later years writing sad, self-pitying, complaining letters to her son Henry. These collected letters span from 1873 to 1892. In 1873 she wrote the following to "My Dear Henry", "she sent dear Florry [a grandchild?] to stay with me, as I am so lonely . . . I can assure you I was so glad to see her, she is quite a companion to one, she talks so nicely." Later she

²² Harriet Bowe, February 1855

²³ *Ibid*, March 1855

added, “You say Bloemfontein is dull, but this place is not much better - what amusement did you have here?”²⁴ In 1883, Mrs. Oertel helped her daughter through pregnancy and childbirth, a role frequently assigned to Victorian mothers, especially in the absence of a doctor or midwife. This role too, had its consequences, “I have been quite a prisoner since Cath has been confined. We are quite alone in the house, and I cannot leave her to go out.”²⁵

Mrs. Oertel’s letters are filled with manipulative ploys aimed at attracting the sympathy and attention of her son. One of these mechanisms was illness and an obsession with her health, which will be analysed in detail in chapter five. Mrs. Oertel’s case exemplifies how some settler women’s solitude increased their dependence on men, especially their sons. After discovering an unkind remark Henry made about her to someone else, Mrs. Oertel felt her relationship with her beloved son threatened, and wrote him this attention-seeking, guilt-inducing letter,

I received your letter by last post. I would have written to you long ere this, but you make a remark in Gibson’s letter that you would not answer my letter, so of course I would not trouble you anymore with my epistles. I cannot think what you have against me all at once, that you say such cruel things of me, and false too . . . I am constantly praying for you, that He may guide you and show you your folly in having such bad thoughts of your poor mother. You cannot think how it grieved me, as you were always a loving and kind son to me, and the other children often said that I thought more of you than of them . . . I hope this is the last time I have to write you a letter of such reproof. I hope in future you will not give me any cause to be annoyed with you. Let us keep up our correspondence as we did in the past, and I will forgive you all. It is in my nature to forgive those that do me an injury. You must try to come around this way when you go to England, for perhaps you may not see me again in this life. I am getting old and weak

²⁴ Mary Oertel, 19 November 1873

²⁵ *Ibid*, 10 July 1883

and I daresay I have not many more years to live.²⁶

In spite of her anger toward Henry, Mrs. Oertel's main objective was to ensure her son's devotion and loyalty to her. Alone and miserable, she became increasingly desperate for company and for visits from Henry and her other children. Her isolated rural existence and radically circumscribed life resulted in a loss of energy and vitality, as well an exaggerated neediness in her relations with men.

Julia Eliza Bowker spent her old age drawing on the friendship of her children and particularly her sons, to alleviate her isolation. In her erratically kept diary, Julia recorded the whereabouts and activities of her children, as well as her own feelings of dependence on them. Like Mrs. Oertel, she was an elderly Victorian woman, living on a farm and had no satisfying work to engage in. Her diary contains lists of interesting books, sketches and extracts from poems, including one that begins, "I herefore dwell so sad and lonely. " When one of her sons left 'Tharfield' to go prospecting, Julia noted, "Holden left us for the gold fields again. Poor boy! This to me has been a sorrowful day!"²⁷ A few years later, she lost another son to the mines,

I could hardly realize the painful fact that he was gone from the old home where he *was* home, and lived at so long! And left his old mother - but if all turns out well for him and he keeps as good and affectionate as he has ever been to me, I shall not regret the step he has taken, and would not have him return.²⁸

²⁶ *Ibid*, 20 November 1885

²⁷ Julia Bowker, 6 April 1887

²⁸ *Ibid*, 31 March 1895

Julia's rural location, her age and her role as a Victorian woman all added to her loneliness and her reliance on her sons. For women, and possibly more so for settler women, their children were their single greatest investment. Rearing children provided women with an occupation, and with company, but as soon as children were old enough, they left home and their mothers also. Women felt the impact of their sudden solitude, "Grieved to return without my dear Miles to Tharfield. That old place is more and more lonely as my children leave for age, one after another."²⁹ Julia Bowker's final diary entry reads,

Mitford and Miles are leaving for Johannesburg today. They came down on 4 June, and now are going in about an hour. I am so sorry to lose their presence from amongst us. I am never so happy as when I have my dear children around me - lonely I shall feel and miss their loved faces for weeks to come. I hope I shall live to see my dear, good, kind boys again.³⁰

Women such as Mrs. Oertel and Julia Bowker were privileged by their class and did not need to work to survive. Not so Harriet Rabone, who worked as teacher and supplemented her income by selling the fruit and vegetables she cultivated. From 1853 she resided in Graaff-Reinet, which was already an established town by that time, and not a remote, unstable frontier settlement. Harriet was part of a more or less secure white community. Unlike earlier settler women, or those living in isolated locations, her identity as a white Victorian woman was presented with fewer challenges and her opportunities for friendship with other settler women would have been envied by the likes of Ellen Case or Anne Francis. In spite of this, Harriet's letters to her friend and confidante "My Dear Agnes" are those of a woman who felt alone and misunderstood.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p.51

³⁰ *Ibid*, 18 September 1898

Unable or unwilling to conform to the Victorian ideal of womanhood, Harriet defied convention by preferring reading to gossiping about fashions or domestic chores, as indicated by her assertion quoted in chapter two, “I would rather let my dresses get rusty than my mind.” She worked for money and enjoyed it, she was not naturally repelled by Africans, she loved to be outdoors, had a playful sense of humour and an open mind, not qualities deemed desirable in a Victorian lady. Harriet was rendered alone and isolated not because of her condition as a settler, but because of her status as a Victorian woman. The attitudes and activities of conventional women bored and irritated her, as discussed in chapter two,

Will you believe it - I dare not let my acquaintances know half the books I read, lest they should entirely lose respect for me as a housekeeper. Is it not hard? It makes me so vexed to talk so much stuff as I must do in my intercourse with them.³¹

Harriet was frustrated by her exclusion from what she perceived to be the stimulating, exciting public sphere. She wrote somewhat bitterly to Agnes,

Do you know we are head over heels in Railways just now, and even our quiet town is roused on the subject, and I really think something will come of it in time? Of course *ladies* are not expected to say more than “They say we are going to have a Railway from here to the Bay. Fancy, how nice it will be!” As to knowing or caring anything about the good to be done to the country, that is too much beyond dress and cooking for them. I am sorry such remarks should be truth, not satire.³²

In spite of, or because of her anger and resentment at being shut out of matters that concerned her, Harriet sought fulfillment within herself instead. She expressed admiration for Germans, whom she felt to be self-sufficient and able to entertain themselves, something she herself had

³¹ Rabone, Arthur (ed) Records of a Pioneer Family. Cape Town: Struik, 1966, p.107

³² *Ibid*, pp.107-108

occasion to learn,

We want such industrious people [Germans]; and people, too, who possess one great advantage - that of having resources of amusement *within themselves* - a very great blessing out here. The want of this is the cause of much of the evil we see around us.³³

Unlike many other settler women, she did not crave the company of a conventional 'female friend' to alleviate her loneliness. On the contrary, she dreaded the arrival of more English settlers,

Do you know I am quite afraid when our railroad is finished we may have an influx of *proper English* people. If we can only get a few foreigners with them, it will not matter so much, as they fall so easily into the free easy mode of life, but *conventional English* are unendurable in Africa.³⁴

Nevertheless, when Harriet was invited to attend a social occasion, she felt obliged to attend,

a gentleman has asked a few friends to spend the evening - a most rare occurrence here, which I hardly liked to accept, for I wanted to look at all the new books, and read my precious letters to Alfred and William. But it is really a matter of principle here to encourage every effort to promote sociability.³⁵

Mary Taylor, who worked at the Healdtown Mission station during the 1870s with her brother, Theophilus Chubb, also expressed her dislike of the company of ordinary, shallow 'ladies',

I had some nice talks with Mrs. Bea. She is one of those happily constituted persons who are usually liked, but can talk most intelligently on suitable occasions. She thinks, and can express her thoughts to one person, but is too retiring to say much in general conversation. I rather dread a long evening with most ladies but should never be wary of

³³ *Ibid*, p.108

³⁴ *Ibid*, p.139

³⁵ *Ibid*, p.101

Mrs. Bea's company.³⁶

Harriet Rabone's correspondence with Agnes provided her with a real outlet for her frustrations, as well as a sympathetic and understanding friend. She acknowledged Agnes's important role in her life, "Thanks and thanks again for your nice letters. You do not know what they are to me. I am longing and lonely for those I can freely speak to, and I know I can to all of you dear, tried friends."³⁷ Indeed, letter writing afforded settler women with the human interaction they yearned for. Letters represented a link with 'home', were a symbol of an organised, civilized society, detailed news about absent family and friends and reminded recipients that they were not entirely forgotten and alone.

The significant role played by letter writing in easing the "miserable solitude" experienced by settler women is borne out by their constant reprimanding of correspondents to reply faster, or more often. Almost without fail, women began their letters with reproachful comments about their friend or family members' neglect or imagined abandonment. When, in 1851, Sarah Godlonton's husband Robert (editor of the Grahamstown Journal) journeyed into the interior and failed to write to her, she rebuked him thus,

I have nothing particular to write you, only to complain that I did not receive anything by last post. I, as usual, was anxiously awaiting the arrival of the [mail?]. To my great disappointment I found not a thing for me. I could not help thinking you quite cruel - so many hundred miles off - and to omit writing me a few lines.³⁸

³⁶ Mary Taylor, 11 November 1872

³⁷ Rabone Records, p.133

³⁸ Sarah Godlonton, 19 January 1851

Sarah felt her husband's absences and his failure to correspond with her keenly, and her letters are symptomatic of her loneliness. Again in 1852 she wrote, "I was disappointed on Monday at not receiving a line by the post."³⁹ Later that same month,

I feel the time very long and expect you do the same. It is four weeks today since you left us, and it seems to me more like two months. Durban [their son] asks when you are coming home - he says you are longer this time than you were before, and little Hetty wants to know the same.⁴⁰

Travelling far from home in order to trade or to conduct other business was usual for male settlers. Consequently, women were generally left behind to mind the homestead and children. Left alone and vulnerable, and surrounded by the alien, untamed East Cape landscape, settler women faced the threat of Otherness, without the reassuring, reinforcing presence of their families, or a homogenous white community. Letters from this community constituted a reminder for settler women of their membership of this group.

Shortly after arriving in South Africa (in the midst of trying to adjust to her new, strange environment), Eliza Cousins wrote to her sister in England and expressed her half-teasing, half-serious disappointment at not having received sufficient post,

I want to know if you are not ashamed of yourselves not to write oftener than you do? I think you might be when I tell you [about] the other day when I went to the post office to enquire if there were any English letters for me. 'No' said the postmaster, 'there has not been one you for you for a long time. Your friends have forgotten you.' Do you hear that and not blush?⁴¹

³⁹ *Ibid*, 11 February 1852

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 24 February 1852

⁴¹ Eliza Cousins, 22 June 1851

Similarly, when her daughter failed to reply to her letters, Hannah Dennison sternly chastised her, "I have waited until my patience is tired, and no letter. Can it be that you forget you have a mother, or is it that you think her beneath your notice? Not to write for so long a time - what ever be the reason? I know not."⁴² These pleas for letters were about more than a need for company. They reflected women's real sense of isolation and a great desire for the known, the familiar.

As a result, the arrival and subsequent reading of letters from 'home', was always a meaningful and important experience for all settlers. Many women recorded the arrival of English letters in their diaries as a significant event. Mrs. Stormont happily observed, "The English mail came in bringing letters, papers and cards from [a list of names]. We have read all. The news from home is always interesting, and ever welcome."⁴³ The enormous importance all settlers attached to letters from home is aptly illustrated by an extract from the memoirs of John Armstrong (husband of Francis Armstrong),

I was sitting outside my waggon, on the lonely and silent and barren waste, with a bright, calm moon above, when the messenger returned, bringing me a large batch of English letters. It was almost too much for me. After a dreary fatiguing journey, in the midst of a desolate plain, England, with all its old cheerful homes, its familiar faces, its friends and kindred, its well-loved scenes, all rushed upon me, and I was overcome.⁴⁴

Here Armstrong connects the various meanings and symbols of settler loneliness in one

⁴² Edgecombe, DR "The Letters of Hannah Dennison, 1820 Settler, 1820 - 1847" Master's Thesis. Rhodes University, 1968, p.130

⁴³ Mrs. Stormont, 2 January 1894

⁴⁴ Carter, TT (ed) A Memoir of John Armstrong. Oxford: John Henry and James Parker, 1957) p.335

paragraph: perception of the African landscape as “lonely” and “barren”, mirroring the inner loneliness of the writer, association of English letters with all that is “cheerful,” “familiar” and “kindred,” and susceptibility to feelings of isolation and abandonment when left alone. In addition, this extract demonstrates how loneliness transcended gender amongst settlers. While women’s position on the frontier, coupled with their profile as Victorian ladies rendered them particularly prone to isolation and loneliness, the need for companionship and self-affirmation was not exclusively female. Victorian standards for male behaviour as brave, stoical, unemotional, ‘manly’ limited the expression of any feeling, especially of vulnerability, in settler men’s writing.

One male settler who had no difficulty in expressing his feelings was the sentimental, alcoholic Thomas Shone. Shone (an 1820 settler), filled his diary (1838-39, 1850-59) with mawkish, lugubrious tributes to his wife, who died in 1837, leaving him lonely and miserable. He sought comfort in drinking, and developed a dependence on alcohol which he tried to overcome by summoning “Resolution” to assist him in fighting temptation. His diary records the daily events of his farm life, his altercations with “Resolution” and his deep longing for a companion (he did eventually remarry). For example, Shone’s entry for Christmas Day, 1838 reads,

Christmas Day. Every thing look’d very dull, it being a rainy day; thank God for the same, the land wanted watering very much, the rivers being nearly dry . . . The children and myself kept within doors on account of the rain. I am still very unhappy in my mind for the loss of my poor partner. I have no-one now to talk to, no friend to confide in. I am a stranger in a foreign land. I hope the Lord will prepare me to follow the only one that ever proved a friend, a wife, and a mother to me. Tomorrow she will be dead one

year, a year of Grief and trouble and sorrow to me, the like I never see before.⁴⁵

Shone's unhappiness was borne partly out of the usual grief to be expected in one whose spouse has died; while part of his misery and loneliness was a result of his location on the frontier, "a stranger in a foreign land."

Ordinary homesickness was another component of settler women's loneliness. A longing for England runs through women's writing as a symptom of their need for 'sameness' and familiarity. Anna Bowker declared to her son Thomas, "All the mountains around us are covered with snow. They put me in mind of Dear Old England - My Dear Old England, where I have spent so many happy days."⁴⁶ Mary Taylor seemed to feel some ambivalence about her move to South Africa, "5 years tomorrow since we saw the last of England, but it's not easy to write one's thoughts."⁴⁷ Yet she recognised that life in England involved a struggle of another kind,

Sometimes I have a great longing to see England again, but it's usually mingled with thinking ahead of everything, the tremendous social problems which glare on one from the streets of London and other large towns. So, I am glad that I have got to choose my path in life. In some [ways?] residence in London is too great a burden to leave one the ordinary enjoyment of life, and cheerfulness is hard to attain.⁴⁸

Thus far, the focus has fallen on the effects of loneliness on frontier women, as if women merely submitted to their condition without attempting to combat it in some way. Settler women took

⁴⁵ Silva, P.M. "The Diaries of Thomas Shone, 1820 Settler, 1838-39 and 1850-59." Masters Thesis. Rhodes University, 1982, p.71

⁴⁶ Anna Bowker, 18 August 1858

⁴⁷ Mary Taylor, 9 November 1872

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 31 August 1872

part in various socially acceptable activities to counteract their isolation. The chief meeting place for women was in church. Weekly church services provided women with relief from the monotony of their lives, as well as the opportunity for socialising and mingling with other women. The Church also symbolised order, reason, Christian values and civilization, making it the ideal haven for lonely settler women in need of affirmation and self-reinforcement. Frequent mention is made in settler women's texts of church-going. "Baby christened and self churchd,"⁴⁹ wrote Harriet Bowe after her long confinement. The benefits of attending church when on board ship, a place characterised by a unique sort of isolation, are expounded by Mrs. Armstrong,

The refreshment and peace of a service on board ship can only be appreciated by those who have tried it, but I hope I shall never forget it. In the midst of the life of weariness and ennui, of discomforts and inconveniences, the Sunday service comes like precious balm.⁵⁰

The significance of church-going is also reflected in the way that women carefully noted the occasions they were unable to attend church. "Dr Drew will be here for consultation and further treatment to my darling [son] - no church for me today," reported Sarah Amm during her son's illness.⁵¹

As a consequence of the passage of time and resulting large, second generation families, a few settler families, for example the Bowkers, formed social networks based on kinship this. The

⁴⁹ Harriet Bowe, 17 June 1855

⁵⁰ Mrs Armstrong, p.9

⁵¹ Sarah Amm, 20 August 1893

diary of Sophie Beddoe, a young woman who was governess to Bertram Bowker's children, documents the interaction of various branches of the massive Bowker clan. These interactions made up a powerful support base upon which the family depended for its survival. Christmas and other culturally significant occasions were celebrated communally, and Sophie's diary depicts an extended, united, mutually-dependent family. Her description of New Year in 1864 reads, "All the family went to Table Farm to a large dancing party. The gentlemen on horseback, ladies and children in the waggon. We all enjoyed the evening greatly, and danced till 4 am, when the Bowkers returned home leaving Emma and me to stay a few days."⁵² This celebration is a dramatic contrast to the dismal New Year's Day experienced by Mrs. Stormont.

Yet, being alone opened up the possibility of a level of introspection and self-development usually denied women by the mainstays of Victorian doctrines on womanhood, duty, self-sacrifice and self-abnegation. As a result of her lonely, difficult life in Graaff-Reinet, Harriet Rabone felt that her life as a struggling settler shaped her identity in a positive way. The following passage was found in her desk drawer after her death in 1890,

This experience goes far with me, namely, that all my difficulties and confusions have gone on clearing themselves up ever since I set out to walk in that way. My consciousness of life is threefold what it was; my perception of what is lovely around me, and my delight in it, threefold; my power of understanding things and of ordering my way, threefold also; the force of my hope and courage, my love to my friend, my power of forgiveness.⁵³

Harriet's frontier isolation and hardships enabled her to shape herself in ways that would not

⁵² Sophia Beddoe, 1 January 1864

⁵³ Harriet Rabone (Rabone Family File, Graaff-Reinet Museum)

have been possible had she chosen to fill her life with chattering, simple-minded Victorian ladies. Her lack of social contact accorded her the time and space she needed for reading, writing, gardening and teaching, activities from which she derived genuine pleasure and satisfaction.

The isolation felt by settler women was a result of both their physical location on remote farms, or journeys into the untamed interior, and self-imposed segregation many chose in favour of disrupting accepted race and class identities. These women's feelings of loneliness indicated not just their lack of companionship or friendship, but also their cultural isolation, and their craving for interaction with like-minded, fellow white settlers. Such interaction helped to reinforce their self-images as civilized, respectable, and moral, and provided white settlers with a coherent, united group identity that could be mobilised in the face of the black majority. The expressions of solitariness found in settler women's diaries and letters are another manifestation of their general inability to transcend old, familiar patterns of behaviour and accepted social configurations. Isolation and loneliness excused settler women from confronting their new environment and its people, or from genuinely engaging with difference and incongruity.

5. ILLNESS AND DIS-EASE

“I am the one who stays in her room reading or writing or fighting migraines. The colonies are full of girls like that, but none I think, so extreme as I.”¹

Postmodernism and its accompanying emphasis on discourse and deconstructing discourse, has given rise to a focus on the body as a text and site of cultural engagement. The body and its diseases have come to be regarded as important reflections of the political, cultural and social concerns of a particular society. At the same time, amongst some scholars of colonialism, there has been a shift away from examining the “public experiences of officials, emphasizing the political activities of white male colonials,” to an increasing focus on the “the relationship between colonialism and the domestic world of British society,” a component of which is the study of women’s private lives. The point of intersection between these two trends, is the study of illness and its meanings amongst colonizing women.

Invalidism, the sickroom, varieties of illnesses and types of cures are all imbued with metaphor and meaning on individual and collective levels. The Victorian era was the cultural and social milieu within which most settler women operated, to varying degrees, and during this period, sickness had a multitude of gender, class, and by extension, racial ramifications. To make sense of these ramifications is to conceive a conceptual framework with which to unlock the significance of settler women’s repeated references to illness and disease. In other words, a thorough theoretical understanding on the nature of Victorian women and illness is a necessary precursor to an analysis of settler women’s narratives.

¹ Coetzee, J.M. In The Heart of the Country. Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1978, p.1

In the introduction to her book Somatic Fictions: Imagining Illness in Victorian Culture, Athena Vrettos outlines her goals, which underline some of the central themes of this chapter,

In exploring the historical assumptions and systems of belief that invested sickness and health with social meaning, this book treats narrative as a crucial component of cultural history. It seeks to identify some of the figurative and ideological spaces the human body occupied in Victorian cultural narratives and the ways in which conceptions of illness structured popular assumptions about individual and social identities.²

Vrettos's emphasis on *narrative* is vital. It is not a concern of this chapter to distinguish between 'real' and 'imagined' illness. Besides which, a belief that all illnesses were strictly physiological in origin does not preclude the possibility that "sufferers often used their diseases albeit unconsciously, to manipulate their surrounding world when other means were unavailable."³ What women *wrote* about their illnesses, and the ways in which these narratives relate to their individual and social identities, are the central concerns of this chapter. As theorists of illness have explained, "While the sufferer's experience of illness itself is rarely only a matter of language . . . any communication about that illness is always discursive. So *our* experience of, or access to, another person's illness is always through language and usually through narrative."⁴ [Emphasis in original] The intersection of frontier demands and challenges, with the complex meanings of illness and the ways in which settler women negotiated and exploited this intersection, will also be addressed.

² Vrettos, Athena Somatic Fictions: Imagining Illness in Victorian Culture. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995, p.2

³ Kushner, Howard I. Review of Shattered Nerves: Doctors, Patients, and Depression in Victorian England. The Journal of Interdisciplinary History. xxiii (1) (Summer 1992), p.163

⁴ Herndl, Diane Price Invalid Women: Figuring Feminine Illness in American Fiction and Culture, 1840 -1940. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993, p.8

When feminist scholars first began to examine the relationship between Victorian women and illness, blame for the apparent proliferation of malingering, seemingly feeble women invalids was attributed to the dominant male medical establishment, which sought to keep women weak and submissive and to circumscribe their lives to the narrow private sphere of domesticity. In this analysis, women were the malleable, unresisting victims of a hegemonic patriarchal order that demanded of them total self-denial and self-abnegation. This rather simplistic, reductionist paradigm has been challenged in recent years,

Women's historians have moved away from the victimization model that dominated early studies of women patients and the male medical establishment and have begun to view medicine as more complicated and less villainous than previous studies assumed.⁵

In place of the outdated victimization model, a new 'rebellion hypothesis' developed, which asserts "women patients were not 'victims' of medical science but instead were able to use it to their advantage in their domestic power struggles."⁶

Various aspects of women's experiences of sickness have been scrutinised to determine the extent to which ill women were able to manipulate their invalid status to control their lives or environments. Acknowledging that women could manipulate their patriarchal-defined identity as frail and sickly to subvert the very system that defined them as such, is problematic for many feminists,

It is difficult for the feminist critic to approach the subject of the invalid woman because

⁵ Theriot, Nancy M. "Women's Voices in Nineteenth-Century Medical Discourse: A Step toward Deconstructing Science." *Signs* 19 (1) (Autumn 1993), p.1

⁶ *Ibid*, p.2

invalidism, which could be described as the extreme of patriarchal definitions of women, is one of the roles against which feminism historically has had to struggle. Whereas women in general are characterized as weak and lacking power, better off staying quiet at home, the invalid is specifically recognised as even weaker and more powerless than most women, and is required to stay at home. Whereas women have been discouraged from involving themselves in productive work, the invalid has been absolutely forbidden it. For a latter twentieth-century feminist, working toward equality of the sexes in the workplace and the home, this powerlessness seems antithetical to feminist goals. A woman's manipulation of that powerlessness is an act that we may understand but that we have learnt to distrust and disapprove of.⁷

This feminist interpretation of invalidism is unsuitable for understanding Victorian women's private acts of subversion and rebellion, because it only credits outward, public challenges to patriarchal authority. It also mistakenly assumes that political equality for men and women is the ultimate or only goal of feminism. External, public resistance was out of reach for most Victorian women. Finding spaces within 'the system' in which to experience some freedom from the limitations of their gendered position, while at the same time retaining the public acceptance and sanction that were so pivotal to Victorian society, was a more realistic strategy for women. The word 'strategy' is not meant to suggest that this process of manipulation of invalidism was always conscious. To the contrary, identifying the possible benefits of illness for women is problematic. Real acquiescence to patriarchal controls, and the exploitation of these controls for female gain, are difficult to differentiate,

it can be painful to sort out which strategies of defining or using invalidism subvert norms (illness as a resistance to patriarchal definitions) and which collude (illness as acceptance of patriarchal definitions). Whereas the nineteenth-century woman may have seen refuge, solace, purpose, or even empowerment in illness, we may see accession to patriarchal definitions and limitations.⁸

⁷ Herndl *Invalid Women*, p.2

⁸ *Ibid*, p.2

Women's ability to extract benefits from illness and invalidism depended largely on their capacity to turn the most conventional and restrictive patriarchal definitions of womanhood to their advantage. One such woman was the nineteenth-century journalist Harriet Martineau. Martineau made a career of her invalidism, and her particular case has been used as "vehicle" for "exploring some of these different models [of explaining illness]."⁹ After developing a career as a successful journalist, Martineau suddenly took ill with a uterine complaint in 1839, "One of England's most active public figures risked being transformed into the epitome of delicate femininity, immobilized and cloistered by her illness."¹⁰ It was this very "cloistering" that enabled Martineau to mobilise her illness and promote a specific and advantageous self-image. In 1844 she published Life in the sick-room: essays by an invalid, in which she expounded her views on invalidism. It was through this book that, "She then became one of the most celebrated 'sickly' intellectuals of her day, and self-consciously constructed a career for herself as Britain's exemplary invalid."¹¹

Martineau challenged conventional perceptions of the female invalid as governed by bodily frailties, and thus incapable of rational or intellectual thought. She believed that "in the sick-room, the invalid was rendered *more* sensitive, *more* knowledgeable."¹² In her own sickroom,

⁹Winter, Alison "Harriet Martineau and the Reform of the Invalid in Victorian England." The Historical Journal. 38 (3) (1995), p.597

¹⁰ Martineau was, according to her own testimony, cured of her ailment one year after she fell ill, by mesmerism. She spent the following five years convalescing.

¹¹ Winter "Harriet Martineau" p.599

¹² *Ibid*, p.599

Martineau was able to continue writing and working in support of social and political reforms, but her invalid status, denoting her female frailty and sensibilities, inoculated her from being labelled ‘mannish’ or unwomanly. In addition, through her invalidism, she was able to exert a degree of control over her environment. Winter notes that,

The sick-room resembled the stereotypical domestic scene of Victorian illness, inasmuch as its inmate was immobile, thoughtful, cared for by others, and in many ways could represent herself, however deceptively, as being in *a domain separate from the world of market forces and economic reality*.¹³ [Emphasis added]

Martineau controlled the flow of visitors in and out of her sickroom, took great care to furnish the room in a fashion that reflected her social and intellectual identity, and relished the privacy that her sickroom afforded her. The absence of a personal, inner world and a lack of control over environment were hallmarks of Victorian womanhood: women were constantly monitored for signs of unhealthy self-interest. Instead women were expected to place the needs of others, specifically those of their family, before their own individual desires. It was this distance from the public sphere and the “world of market forces” and the sickroom that make it invalidism such a desirable state, especially on the frontier, where the reality of the external world was all the more frightening and uncertain.

Self-sacrifice and service to others were valued in women, and wives put these virtues to work by catering to their husbands and husbands’ friends. Illness provided women with a socially acceptable escape from these services and domestic responsibilities, as well as a secluded, tranquil physical space for self-reflection. Like Martineau, many settler women were able to

¹³ *Ibid*, p.603

make use of the sick-role to withdraw to a private, safe, inner world. As some twentieth-century sociologists have argued, illness can be used, “as a coping response, as an avoidance mechanism, and as a justification for failure.”¹⁴ Settler women mediated their gender, class and environment by deploying the sick-role in one, or a combination of the above ways.

In some respects, the frequent references to illness in the diaries and letters of settler women contradict the traditional settlerist historiography that has sought to represent these women as invulnerable, hardy, tireless pioneers. However, this is not to suggest that these women were weakly surrendering to the Victorian ideal of delicate, helpless, fragile womanhood. At the centre of the theme of illness amongst settler women lies a paradox: illness can be read as both a surrendering to the stress and conflict of the frontier environment, as well as a powerful, yet unconscious tool for gaining some control over this environment. In other words, illness was both a symptom of and a potential solution to the conditions of frontier life. The need for a private space characterised by order, coherence and continuity was exaggerated in a colonial setting, where settler women faced a harsh and challenging environment. Miriam Bailin has described the sickroom as “a haven of comfort, order, and natural affection,” which “offers a form of protection from the discontinuities of experience and frustrations of communal life.”¹⁵ It is possible therefore, to understand settler women’s apparent preoccupation with illness as symptomatic of their need to retreat to a space of comfort and familiarity, impenetrable to the

¹⁴ Wolinsky, Fredric D. “Sick-Role Legitimization.” in Gochman, D. (ed) Health Behaviour: Emerging Research Perspectives. New York: Plenum Press, 1988, p.181

¹⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 6, 18

outside world of danger, confusion and responsibility.

While a withdrawal into the sick-role by a settler woman may, on one level, represent an unwillingness or an inability to cope with the demands of being a frontier inhabitant, on another level, adopting the feminine sick-role delivered a powerful message in itself. If a function of white women settlers was to instil the cultural values and social systems of their homeland, then playing the part of the sensitive, sickly, refined lady reinforced gender, class and in this case, racial boundaries. Possibly, as settler women felt their identities come under threat on the frontier, the sick-role became increasingly useful for bolstering their self-image as English ladies who were importantly contrasted with robust, strong, lusty African women. The relationship between class and illness also contributed to the desirability of certain maladies. Roy Porter comments on the fashionable status of biliousness in Georgian England,

Biliousness still seems to have been a la mode a decade later, in Beddow's time. Discussing that appellation, the Bristol doctor commented, "delicate women are particularly liable . . . they style themselves bilious in consequence. Indeed, the term 'bilious' threatens to become synonymous with lady, as Hamlet declares: 'Frailty, thy name is woman.'"¹⁶

Invalidism was a condition associated with the monied, leisured classes who did not need to work for a living and could afford to languish in sickrooms, "For nineteenth-century women, illness represented feminine refinement, wealth, and leisure; it was a condition to which women

¹⁶ Porter, Roy "'Expressing Yourself Ill': The Language of Sickness in Georgian England." in Porter, Roy and Burke, Peter (eds) Language, Self, and Society: A Social History of Language. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991, p.286

aspired.”¹⁷ In her description of Agnes Merriman (wife of John X. Merriman), Eva Hunter wryly notes, “Agnes was, it is true, physically small and suffered the erratic health that was thought not unseemly in a woman of her time and class.”¹⁸ While men were meant to resist illness, women were expected to succumb to it. Sarah Childs’s comment written on board ship bound for South Africa underscores this discrepancy, “I must give him [her brother, Jim] credit for the manful manner in which he has battled against sickness.”¹⁹ Some diseases, notably tuberculosis, had their own specific set of associations, “Illness thus became linked to desirable states of delicacy, sensibility, and personal distinction. Tuberculosis in particular was viewed as a sign of specialness, of consuming passion, genius, or beauty.”²⁰ Although much of the theoretical work on meanings and metaphors of Victorian illness focuses on examples drawn from Victorian fiction, this does not discredit the validity of the findings of such studies. Fiction represents the collective imagination of a society, and reflects the cultural values and customs of a society, either by endorsing these practices, or by reacting against them.

On the frontier, the classed and gendered nature of illness articulated with the racial discourse of the colony to place even more emphasis on the special status of the white woman invalid. Black women were generally cast as athletic, healthy, robust, energetic and therefore unfeminine and

¹⁷ Herndl Invalid Women, p.152

¹⁸ Hunter, Eva “‘When One Has Tasted Power’: The Merriman Marriage and Masculinities Among the Late Victorian Cape Colonial Elite.” Gender and Colonialism Conference. University of the Western Cape, 1997, p.1

¹⁹ Sarah Childs, 19 July 1862

²⁰ Bailin The Sickroom, p.10

unladylike. Settler women tended to describe African women in these terms, associating them with nature, a lack of refinement, the outdoors and manual labour, all aspects of their own identities which they were encouraged to deny and eliminate, but which frontier life called up and confounded. Interestingly, English-speaking white women depicted their Afrikaner counterparts in similar terms, as hardy, coarse, earthy, and boorish. Such descriptions hardened into portrayals of Afrikaner women as crude, mannish, unrefined and vulgar in accounts of the South African war, as discussed in chapter three. In contrast, most English-speaking settler women styled themselves as refined, feminine, dainty ladies, and sometimes this role overlapped with that of the invalid. In embracing the role of the fragile lady invalid, settler women were not shirking their responsibilities as cultural custodians and civilizers. Instead, they provided the colonized with an exemplary model of Victorian womanhood.

In past studies of settler women, much has been made of the physical hardships these women endured. Special attention has been drawn to the absence of proper medical care on the frontier, especially in the first part of the nineteenth-century. These included the difficulties for pregnant women who bore large numbers of children in finding suitable midwives or doctors, the high infant mortality rate and inadequate food supplies which led to malnutrition and increased susceptibility to disease. There can be little doubt that these conditions did contribute to sickness and mortality, but to constantly highlight these circumstances in order to throw into relief the tenacity and resilience of settlers, is pointless and does not adequately explain the preoccupation with illness in the writings of settler women. The point is not so much what settler women did not have with regard to medical care, it was what they had relinquished that made it all the more

difficult for them to resist disease,

These women left behind, however, the network of family and friends and the comforts of their home environment, sacrificing cultural and recreational resources. Further, and perhaps more important, they left behind many of the resources of modern science and technology - the material signs of that “progress” that was so much an object of faith in Victorian England - to take up life in a land they viewed as primitive and superstitious.²¹

Sometimes illness enabled women to reclaim, or create new social networks by eliciting the sympathy, time and attention of their family and friends. In this way, the loneliness experienced by settler women could potentially be alleviated by the sick-role, which provided them with the concern, care and company of others. Scholars who have examined the experiences of settler women with the hope of demonstrating the supposedly “liberating” influence of the frontier, have simply added a feminist twist to traditional settlerist thinking. Vernon, in the hopes of proving that settler women were unconventional, robust, and hard-working, writes that the healthy East Cape climate contributed toward liberating women from their customary domestic position indoors. She argues that,

The good climate of the Cape was not confined to the frontier zone, but it was one of the factors which enabled women to lead physically active lives, unlike the conditions in their European home environments, and contributed to their good health.²²

A physically active life and healthy climate do not automatically equal vitality and well-being, and certainly do not equal female liberation. By the same token, ill-health does not equal acquiescence to patriarchal authority. While settler women may have been forced to spend more

²¹ Chaudhuri, Nupur “Memsahibs and Motherhood in Nineteenth-Century Colonial India.” Victorian Studies. 31 (4) (Summer 1988), p.519

²² Vernon, Gillian The Imperfect Ladies: Four Victorian Women on the Eastern Cape Frontier: 1843-1879. Honours Thesis. University of South Africa, 199, p.55

time outdoors or doing physical work, Vernon fails to adequately explore the extent to which women did this voluntarily, and the impact such new activities had on women's identities. It is implausible to suggest that women simply abandoned Victorian gender proscriptions for the relaxed codes of the frontier without suffering any crisis of identity or sense of dislocation.

Part of this dislocation is manifest in the complex relationship between settler women and illness, and the way this relationship was negotiated in women's writing. Illness is one lens through which to view the experiences of women living on the East Cape frontier. The deployment of illness or invalidism as a coping mechanism, as a civilizing device, as a means of escaping domestic responsibilities, or as an antidote to loneliness, enabled settler women to act on their environment while retaining societal approval and regard. If invalidism is viewed as a caricature of the perfect Victorian lady, then it is possible to understand how settler women may have found the role suitable for resisting the disruptive influence of the frontier, and fortifying their identities. Women were able to manipulate their circumstances by exploiting Victorian perceptions of illness, and the example of Ellen Case successfully illustrates this contention.

Ellen's diary is filled with morbid, typically Victorian references to her own maladies, of which there were many, as well as her family's. While living at Peddie in 1893, she recorded a number of her own sicknesses. A selection of entries reveals her preoccupation with ill-health,

Sunday, 1 January 1893. I was feeling very weak and unwell so had some breakfast in bed . . .

Friday, 20 January. I was feeling very ill with pain in back and head.

Saturday, 21 January. The doctor gave me a tonic - he says it is influenza.

Sunday, 22 January. We began Sunday school in church - I am superintendent now Mrs.

Piers has left. I felt wretchedly ill.

Saturday, 18 February. Since writing in this book, Philip [her husband] has been very ill - very feverish & could not sleep for four nights. I have been ill in bed too. Then we were both convalescent and laid up on hammock chairs in the garden. Mrs. Coyte came to look after the house for me & nursed us too. She was here from Sunday till Thursday. She went home at nights after seeing everything was at hand for us in the night. We had refreshments on a box between our beds. People sent us grapes and broth.²³

Ellen's description of her and her husband's invalidism provides a detailed account of the domestic chores carried out by Mrs. Coyte - chores Ellen herself was able to eschew as a result of her illness. Illness was a socially sanctioned escape from domestic work for some women, offering "one of the few opportunities for real rest for the mother and the housewife."²⁴

Tellingly, when she over-exerted herself, Ellen once again fell ill,

Friday, 5 May. Miss Nesbitt came to spend the day to help me cut out for the sewing party, as I am so weak and queer. I fell down yesterday, after over-working - cutting up a pig etc.

Monday, 8 May. The doctor sounded me - said I am very weak. No disease of the heart, which he rather thought there was. He has given me a strong iron tonic.²⁵

In this extract, there appears to be a strong correlation between cutting up the pig and the subsequent weakness and "queerness" that Ellen complains of. Cutting up the pig, a dirty, outdoor task, not befitting a Victorian lady, caused Ellen to retreat into the role of frail, delicate femininity, thus reaffirming her threatened identity and appealing to her own sense of self.

Later in 1893, it becomes increasingly apparent that Philip Case was not earning a sufficient

²³ Ellen Case, 1 January - 18 February 1893

²⁴ Herndl *Invalid Women*, p.28

²⁵ Ellen Case, 5 - 8 May 1893

salary to support his family, much to Ellen's concern, and he attempted to pressure the Bishop to have him moved to a wealthier parish. The Bishop stalled, but before long Ellen was diagnosed with "rapid consumption," and was ordered by her doctor to move to a healthier area. He suggested Cradock. Ellen's illness precipitated her husband's transfer to the diocese of Cradock, and in her diary she records her relief at the prospect of moving,

He [Dr. Johnson] wants us to go up Cradock way. He is going to write to the Bishop, he says, to tell him how necessary it is for us to leave. Philip will go & see the Bishop next week & see if he can send him to another place more bracing. Now we shall have the expense and bother of moving again, but it is all for the best. I have certainly been feeling very ill lately.²⁶

Doctor's orders were the main legitimating force behind Ellen's decision to leave Peddie for Cradock without her husband,

A wet day again - so now we must go tomorrow afternoon if fine. Dr. Johnson does not want me to lose a day more than can be helped before going away. He says I am getting rapidly worse & he is very anxious for me to go before it is too late.²⁷

Ellen's careful recording of her doctor's remarks suggests that she was attempting to rationalise her decision to leave Peddie, and the tone of her writing implies that her terrible illness somehow invested her with importance and uniqueness. Her rather melodramatic comments imply that she was virtually on her deathbed, which seems unlikely given that she lived for another twenty three years after this.²⁸

²⁶ Ellen Case, Saturday 23 September 1893

²⁷ *Ibid*, Saturday 7 October 1893

²⁸ Ellen Case died in 1926 and her grave is at the New Cemetery in Grahamstown.

Ellen's narrative also reveals some of the benefits of the sick-role for a woman. For example, she relinquished her duties as a mother and was able to employ a maid, Jane, to care for her children.

On her first night away from Peddie she wrote,

I felt very ill there [at the roadside hotel] & went to bed about 7:30. Jane slept with the children in another room. It was a treat to feel dear little Charlie would not disturb me.²⁹

Apart from the secondary benefits that illness afforded some women, invalidism was also identified as a sign of distinction, a mark of individuality. Ellen's repeated references to her doctor's concern for her well-being reflect this association between illness and specialness.

Similarly, Mary Moffat constantly singled herself out as the only *truly* sick person on board the ship that brought her to South Africa. Also obsessed with her every tiny malady, she was loathe to concede that anybody else may have been suffering the same complaint, "My head very bad indeed, which renders me quite stupid. Can neither work nor read. I never was worse at home. I grow worse every day. All the ladies have headaches, but mine is by far the worst."³⁰ Mrs. Moffat, it seems, identified herself as an invalid, and felt threatened by the possibility of having to share this status with others. Her illness set her apart from men, from less sensitive, less well-bred women, and later on the frontier, from Africans.

In another entry from her ship voyage, Mrs. Moffat noted, not without some pride, "I have my old companion, the headache violently - it gets worse every day. I have also had what is termed the prickles heat. A rash, very commonplace, a very troublesome thing but healthy. Only Mrs.

²⁹ Ellen Case, Sunday 8 October 1893

³⁰ Mary Moffat, p.21

Beck's child and I have it."³¹ To describe a headache as a companion implies that the headache provides some comfort and familiarity, which it clearly did for Mrs. Moffat, who felt alienated and afraid as she left behind everything that was safe and constant at home, to start a new life with her missionary husband in South Africa. Moreover, she was distinguished by the fact that she suffered from a "commonplace" rash that in fact only attacked her and one other passenger. This sense of personal character and distinction were vital to a woman who was struggling to face a crisis of identity brought about by her decision to leave behind the society by whose standards she had previously assessed and judged herself. Defining herself as ill provided Mrs. Moffat with a link to the socio-cultural framework of 'home' that tended to define all women as sickly and delicate. Illness can thus be understood as yet another means by which settler women resisted change and sought to maintain their identities as English ladies absolutely intact, regardless of the appropriateness of this behaviour in an African frontier setting.

Thus, the repeated references to illness in settler women's diaries such as Mary Moffat's, can be read as attempt's to negotiate the conflicting demands made by Victorian ideals of womanhood, and pioneer life on the East Cape frontier. This analysis is supported by Herndl, who argues that,

Invalidism has historically offered women a way to resolve seriously conflicting definitions of a woman to achieve a kind of power when no other means opened up. Invalidism, therefore, can offer women a coherent and simple role in a world where multiple and conflicting roles are threatening or disappointing.³²

A close examination of Moffat's diary reveals that she experienced a great deal of anxiety and

³¹ *Ibid*, p.10

³² Herndl *Invalid Women*, p.10

conflict about her new role as missionary,

Last night by moonlight my feelings were sweetly sad. I considered my situation literally a pilgrim, a stranger, a sojourner, and viewed heaven only as my home.³³

And later,

I laid in bed most part of the day, my head was so very bad I could not bear up. I have had a very severe attack of the headache such as I used to have at home. Am obliged to take medicine constantly. I sometimes feel afraid I shall not leave this complaint in the sea, but take it with me to Africa. If so, it will be a great burden & hinderance to my doing my duty.³⁴

There is a hint in the last sentence that illness may prove to be a welcome justification for avoiding her “duty.” Representing herself as ill provided Mrs. Moffat with a temporary solution to her frightening and conflict-ridden new role.

In her short diary, Mrs. Stormont tells an extended story about the case of a Miss Allan, who taught at Lovedale school, where Mrs. Stormont and her husband worked as missionaries. It is a story worth relating in some detail, as it paints a vivid picture of the quintessential Victorian lady invalid. On her way to church one morning, Miss Allan suddenly found herself feeling ill, and upon being spotted by a concerned friend, a Miss Fairlie, was encouraged to miss church and rest. Mrs. Stormont’s account of the episode is protracted,

She [Miss Allan] looked so ill that Miss Fairlie, who was dressed and ready to go to church, insisted that she should remain in her house till she had done something for her, declaring that it was madness to think of going to the hall, and that she would faint during the service if she persisted in going. Reluctantly she yielded at last to Miss F’s persuasion

³³ Mary Moffat, p.7

³⁴ *Ibid*, p.21

and lay down with her clothes on. Her chest was very painful, and Miss F. thought that rubbing it might relieve her, so she coaxed her to undress, and to have her chest rubbed. That, with a little medicine and a good sleep would make a great difference and she would waken almost well again.³⁵

Miss Allan did wake up much improved but was accused of making a fuss, by Miss Dodd, one of her superiors at the Girls' School,

We heard her [Miss Dodd] thanking Miss F. for the trouble which Miss A. had given by making such a 'fuss' over herself, and Miss F. saying there had been neither trouble nor fuss! Miss D. went on to say, in effect, that Miss A. was only imposing on Miss F's goodness, that she 'told a lie' in saying she had been in bed all day on Saturday, that her room mattresses had been turned out, that Mr. Moir was very angry that she was sick there instead of at the Girls' School, that by so doing, she acted as if she could not get proper attention there, that she ought to have reported herself as sick to Miss D. and that she had tried to fall sick outside first to create a fuss, and by her action blame the Girls' School. Many other equally cruel remarks she made, and the tone in which all were uttered was decidedly malicious. Considering that she must have known that every word was heard by the sick girl, her conduct was not that of a woman. It spoke volumes of the kind of treatment Miss A. would have received had she been ill at the Girls' School - from Miss D. at any rate.³⁶

After this, Mrs. Stormont makes several biting remarks about the heartlessness of some missionary women, and then returns to the case of Miss Allan, "As may be imagined, these cruel accusations threw Miss A. into a dreadful state of excitement. She tossed about in bed, tore her hair, cried, called out - but Miss D's voice drowned all." Mrs. Stormont defended Miss Allan against the "cruel accusations," and the following day, when she had not recovered, invited Miss Allan to stay with her. Subsequent diary entries are filled with details of Miss Allan's decline into invalidism, and the apparent lack of sympathy shown by the inhabitants of Lovedale. Some of

³⁵ Mrs. Stormont, 22 April 1894

³⁶ *Ibid*, 22 April 1894

Mrs. Stormont's observations include,

She came into the dining-room after we had started breakfast, but looked as if she should have remained in bed. She looked very ill. Her breakfast was only a pretence, for she scarcely ate anything. As she would not go to bed, I unfolded our bedchair into a couch, and moved it into another corner to avoid the draught. There she lay all the morning, but before dinner she was able to sit up again.³⁷

Miss Allan's illness was diagnosed by a doctor, and the list of symptoms suggest that her illness was at least partly somatic,

I told them that the doctor had been yesterday & on being asked what he said was the matter, said 'severe nervous debility and other things.' I can't go over the list of ailments to everybody. Besides this great nervous debility, there was inflammation of the bladder, urinary complications, there had been severe palpitation of the heart, all brought on by excitement and cold.³⁸

Miss Allan continued to reside at the Stormont's, refused to see most callers, and tried, mostly unsuccessfully, to continue with some of her teaching duties such as correcting exam papers. The inhabitants of Lovedale were less than sympathetic to Miss Allan's plight. Mrs. Stormont lamented, "nobody in Lovedale has called to ask for her but Mr. Moir and Mr. Bokwe." Mrs. Geddes seemed "surprised to see Miss A. look so ill," while "Mrs. R. seemed surprised that the doctor had ever been" and Mr. R. "remarked that Miss A. was very excitable."

The most important aspect of this story is not Miss Allan's sickness, but rather the responses of others to her illness. It seems from their reactions that the inhabitants of Lovedale were fully aware of the potential power of illness, especially when wielded by a woman. Miss Allan was

³⁷ *Ibid*, 27 April 1894

³⁸ *Ibid*, 27 April 1894

constantly surveyed for signs that she was feigning sickness, malingering or making a fuss, implying selfishness and self-indulgence, not characteristics admired in Victorian women. Obviously unable to contend with her life at Lovedale which was not, in the 1890s, part of the frontier but an established mission station, Miss Allan retreated into ill-health and even hysteria. Her outburst after hearing Miss Dodd's "cruel accusations" was certainly hysterical. As an invalid, she was able to relinquish her responsibilities and gain some control over her environment. This control was manifest in the suspicious, vigilant questions that others asked about Miss Allan's condition, and fears bestowed on Miss Allan's illness a significance that it otherwise would not have had. She quietly submitted to her friends' advice, ate little, remained inactive and silent, and was a parody of Victorian womanhood. It precisely in this caricatured and incontrovertible role that Miss Allan hoped to find solace,

For the woman who lacked any other feasible way to express her dissatisfaction and who was, in fact, taught not to value or even recognize that dissatisfaction, an illness that was merely an extension of socially accepted traits may have presented itself as the easiest outlet for expressing her problems.³⁹

As the primary care giver to the invalid, Mrs. Stormont herself achieved a certain status. She took pains to reassure everybody of the authenticity of Miss Allan's illness. Her function as caring, concerned missionary depended on the authenticity, severity and duration of the sickness. The important role afforded women who cared for the sick provided them with an identity as nurse, helper, compassionate and gentle lady, as well as a sense of being needed. On the frontier especially, nursing sick relatives and friends accorded women a special status and enabled them to make, by their own ideals, a recognisable contribution to the pioneer community. Styling

³⁹ Herndl Invalid Women, p.30

themselves as nurses and helpmates was one way for women to validate and define themselves, by exaggerating existing Victorian gender roles, rather than by challenging them overtly.

Victorian women's manipulation of illness to attract the attention and sympathy of others is best understood as a desperate measure taken when no other method of resistance or coping seemed possible. Thus, in the cases of Anna Bowker and Mary Oertel, their constant and persistent remarks about their poor health in self-absorbed letters to their respective sons are indicative of their inability to contend with their lives as lonely, isolated, fearful settler women, as discussed in chapter four. Both women were obsessed with illness and did not write a single letter without recording some malady and lamenting how "poorly" they felt. Illness, coupled with guilt-inducing mother-to-son rhetoric, was used as leverage by these women to try and gain the sympathy and understanding of their sons. Mrs. Oertel wrote to her son, Henry, and her daughter-in-law, Maggie,

I should like to come on a visit to you again, but I am afraid to travel alone as my health is not so good as it was formerly. I am so subject to giddiness in the head. It comes on so suddenly, it is the same as my poor mother was, but still she lived to a good old age. Henry must come to see me, and bring you with him, it will do you and him good.⁴⁰

I have not been well for the past fortnight. I have an attack of my old complaint indigestion. I have been free from it for so long, and feel it come on so suddenly, but I feel a little better the last two days.⁴¹

I received your last letter by last post and I am sorry I could not answer it before. I was laid up so ill that I could hardly read your letter, but by God's mercy I am up again, and the complaint has left me, but I feel so extremely weak, it is quite a difficulty for me to

⁴⁰ Mary Oertel, 8 June 1882

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 9 August 1883

write, but still, I make an effort. I had dysentery so bad.⁴²

Mrs. Oertel managed to sound simultaneously wheedling, self-pitying, crafty, stoical and martyred in her efforts to demonstrate the hardships she endured and managed to survive. Illness lent Mrs. Oertel the identity that she lacked but craved, that of a suffering but courageous invalid, who was pitied and supported by her family. Her letters also attempted to frighten Henry into visiting her and thereby relieving her chronic loneliness. By likening her “giddiness” in the head to that of her dead mother, she underhandedly suggested to Henry that although her own mother lived to a good age, she doubted that she herself would be as fortunate. This barbed remark was meant to fill Henry with guilt and remorse for neglecting his mother, and rush to her side immediately. Illness was undoubtedly a powerful tool with which women could gain control of their environments and the people around them, and by playing up to the Victorian characterisation of women as weak, feeble in body and mind, and in need of protection, women forced men to assume their gender role as defenders and protectors. This certainly gave women a measure of control over the men in their lives, for if a man ignored a woman’s plea for help or sympathy, he would be rejecting his own socially-sanctioned identity as strong, manly protector.

The letters of Anna Bowker to her son Holden are remarkably similar to those that Mary Oertel penned to her son Henry. Mrs. Bowker wrote most of her letters to Holden in the late 1850s, when she was in her mid to late seventies, and so part of her incessant focus on illness was related to her old age. Nevertheless, Mrs. Bowker’s preoccupation with sickness, and her

⁴² *Ibid*, 11 December 1884

tendency to identify people entirely on the basis of their health or ill-health, suggests partly that she had little else to occupy her, and partly a need for continuity. The life of Anna Bowker as traced through her letters is connected by her accounts of the maladies, illnesses and recoveries that she and her extended family were subject to. In one letter to Holden, she reported that Bertram, another of her sons, was not at all well, and a few weeks later she wrote, “I am thankful to say our dear Bertram is much better though far from strong - he is so thin!”⁴³ The details of Mrs. Bowker and her family’s sicknesses and recuperations were a strand of continuity that linked the narrative of her letters, and reflected the changing fortunes and circumstances of various members of the Bowker clan. For instance, Mrs. Bowker chose to express her disapproval at her son’s decision to work in Cape Town for part of each year in health-related terms,

I can’t see any good that is done. It is much better to sit at home than to go to that unhealthy horrid place. You or none of you will ever have your health as long as you remain in Cape Town, and the sooner you leave it the better.⁴⁴

Illness and recovery were predictable constants that could, to a certain extent, be depended on and although not welcomed or celebrated, were comprehensible and (sometimes) treatable, unlike the foreign, unfamiliar Eastern Cape environment and its inhabitants. Almost all of Mrs. Bowker’s discussions of illness were followed by a description of the measures she had taken to remedy her condition, and results of the treatment,

My letter is all about sickness. I am very poorly and have been for some time. I can’t write with any comfort to myself. I don’t feel able. I got a twist in bed turning, I don’t

⁴³ Anna Bowker, 5 January 1861

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 10 July 18[60]. Holden Bowker was a Member of Parliament in Cape Town.

know how, and I have had such a pain under my right breast and it now goes through to my back and is very troublesome as well as very painful. I am taking my [old?] medicine brandy and salt. It gets very bad every now and then - I can hardly move.⁴⁵

Mrs. Bowker listed all her symptoms, and their possible causes and cures. Her constant ailments accorded her the status of an invalid, and she based at least part of her sense of self on this status. Illness, unlike the alien frontier, was something known and knowable, and in spite of the pain that she suffered, Mrs. Bowker did exert some control over her physical well-being.

The recurrence of illness as a theme in the personal writings of settler women is a further manifestation of their need for a coherent sense of self and a consistent identity which they were able to shape and reshape in accordance with the demands and strains of frontier life. The relationship between illness and settler women's identity is multi-levelled. Firstly, in the Victorian imagination, illness was associated with higher states of being, with wealth, desirable delicacy and fragility and was in many ways, an exaggeration of nineteenth-century femininity. Poor health was linked to class, race and gender, "thereby connecting biological and social identities."⁴⁶ When feminine identities came under threat on the frontier, women who withdrew into illness or invalidism were able to reclaim their status as refined, cultivated ladies. In this analysis, illness could be interpreted as a surrender to the tensions and conflicts of frontier life. Rather than adapt to their new environments, or confront the Otherness of their surroundings and its inhabitants, women frequently retreated into a role that was safe, familiar, and culturally

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 26 January 1858

⁴⁶ Vrettos *Somatic Fictions*, p.5

endorsed.

Secondly, the sick-role was accompanied by practical benefits, such as legitimate exemption from onerous household tasks or child-minding, and seclusion from the frightening, threatening, unknown territory that they inhabited. In addition, illness could be deployed to capture the attention and companionship of friends and relatives, whose approval and comfort could potentially ameliorate the loneliness and anxiety that plagued Eastern Cape frontierswomen, “Representing oneself as an invalid puts into play a whole structure of care, attention, responsibility, and privilege.”⁴⁷ In this way, and because of the familiar patterns of sickness and recovery, settler women were able to gain a measure of control over their lives and identities through illness, or more importantly, through writing about illness. Illness did not merely signify a surrender to the stresses of public life and in this case, frontier life, but was also a tool with which women could exert some influence on their environment. Herndl eloquently captures the relationship between disaffected, unhappy, dislocated nineteenth-century women and the illnesses they presented,

For the woman who lacked any other feasible way to express her dissatisfaction and who was, in fact, taught not to value or even recognize that dissatisfaction, an illness that was merely an extension of socially acceptable traits may have presented itself as the easiest outlet for expressing her problems. Whether or not such illness was a real technique of resistance, it was, at the least, a symptom of social “dis-ease.”⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Herndl *Invalid Women*, p.9

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p.30

6. COPING MECHANISMS

An exploration of the effects of frontier life on settler women, and the fear, insecurity, identity crises and cultural resistance that characterized women's frontier experiences, should not preclude an examination of some of the ways in which these women attempted to cope with their surroundings and its challenges. Some women actively sought to change and modify their environment, whereas others simply tried to adapt using whatever means were available to them. In the preceding chapters, attention has been paid to the frontier's impact on settler women, and their resulting retreat into familiar social patterns, traditional gender roles, Victorian domesticity, and safe racial categories. All of these responses form part of women's efforts to master their surroundings, cope with frontier life, and reassert their identities as white, English-speaking 'ladies.'

In addition to these less direct coping mechanisms, women employed a host of other survival techniques with which to negotiate frontier life. These drew largely on the remaining connections between the settler woman and what she associated with 'home', including letters from family and friends in Britain, newspapers from Britain, church membership, English books, gardening to transform the East Cape environment, celebration of traditional holidays such as Christmas and Easter, or engaging in 'English' customs such as needlepoint or piano-playing. Alternatively, some women attempted to incorporate some indigenous elements of the Eastern Cape into their lives, such as foods, plants, clothes or basic language, in order to mediate the split between their customary lifestyle, and the demands of their new terrain. Finally, and most

significantly for this thesis, settler women made sense of their frontier experiences by writing them down in letters and journals, thereby lending them some coherence and order, as well as providing a cathartic outlet for painful, confusing, or incomprehensible episodes or emotions.

Recreating familiarity was one of the key methods with which settler women rendered their frontier lives manageable. The importance of letter-writing as a means of alleviating loneliness and providing women with activity and stimulus, has already been mentioned in chapter four. Letters from British friends and relatives also represented a link with the known, the familiar, as demonstrated rather dramatically by 1820 settler Ann Francis, in a letter to her sister at 'home', "I envy this paper because it is going to England; and declare, rather than stay here, I will leave the country in an open boat."¹ Many letters open with a remonstrance to the recipient about their poor correspondence, reiterating the need settlers felt to keep in touch with familiar figures from their previous lives in Britain. Even the expense of postage was dismissed as less important than letter-writing to the necessarily frugal settler women. Harriet Rabone commented to her friend Agnes, "they [relatives] do not like to tax us with the postage - as if an immigrant thought of the postage when it's a letter from home! . . . The very last of all the last things we mean to economise in, is our letters."²

Like diaries, which will be addressed later, letters provided settler women with a safe space in which to negotiate their identities. If maintenance and preservation of identity are accepted as

¹ "A tale of two settlers" The Settler, 66 (3) (1992), p.5

² Rabone, Arthur (ed) Records of a Pioneer Family. Cape Town: Struik, 1966, p.102

central coping mechanisms on the frontier, then the value of letters becomes all the more significant. Erlank does not “think it possible to over-emphasise the importance of letter writing in their own homes to these women.” Letters afforded women a private sphere in which they “were writing histories of themselves in which their various identities were revealed to their correspondents.”³ Thus, through letter writing, pioneer women were able to develop a sense of themselves, and this self-awareness was crucial for survival in a settlement where identities were constantly challenged and displaced.

Books and newspapers sent from Britain helped settler women keep abreast of current events at ‘home’ and enabled women to boost their cultural awareness, keep in touch with social trends in the metropolis, and attempt to mimic them on the frontier. Reading also played a large part in the lives of women who lived in isolation on farms or remote colonial outposts, and were severed from social contact. For example, at the end of her memoirs, Martha Jane Webber declared, “Reading has been the chief recreation of my life.”⁴ In an 1871 diary entry, the young Eliza Dugmore wrote, “A wet day, we were obliged to remain in the house all day, amused ourselves with writing and reading.”⁵ Reading transported the settler woman out of her difficult, alien existence into the more predictable landscape of the English novel. Dickens was a great favourite amongst settler women. It also provided entertainment, fantasy, comic relief, and

³ Erlank, Natasha “Letters Home: The Experiences and Perceptions of Middle Class British Women at the Cape 1820-1850.” Masters Thesis. University of Cape Town, 1995, p.198

⁴ Martha Webber, p.42

⁵ Eliza Dugmore, p.2

respite from the monotonous grind of daily chores, as Harriet Rabone illustrated when she flippantly remarked, “It [Carlyle’s Hero Worship] is a fascinating book and makes one think, which is very refreshing.”⁶ Reading English books and papers brought ‘home’ onto the frontier, enabling settlers to feel part of British events, values and trends.

Whilst keeping in contact with relatives and friends in the metropole was crucial for the preservation of settler women’s identity, a kin network on the frontier was just as important for survival. Women who were part of large extended families, such as the Bowkers, were less susceptible to the loneliness and insecurity that plagued those who lived in virtual isolation, with small nuclear families and no friends nearby. Weddings, holidays, religious festivals, or market days were often cause for settlers to gather for communal celebrations where their collective identity could be asserted, and individuals could swap news, stories, or advice. Sophia Beddoe, governess to Bertram Bowker’s children, filled her diary with references to the social activities of the Bowkers, who were always calling on one another and arranging enjoyable family gatherings. The significance of children to settler women has already been addressed, but other kinship ties were just as important in enabling women to contend with their new lives. Sibling relationships in particular, were a vital source of support and comfort for many women. Eliza Cousins and Sarah Childs both depended heavily on their respective brothers for reassurance and companionship. Creating and sustaining strong friendship and familial bonds was one way in which settler women contended with frontier life. These bonds replaced those left behind in Britain, alleviated loneliness and facilitated the production of a homogenous settler identity,

⁶ Rabone Records, p.108

which individual settlers could draw on as they struggled to maintain a sense of self in a foreign and seemingly hostile environment.

Servants and the work they performed helped settler women to cope by relieving them of some of their tedious domestic chores. Also, the presence of a local African in their homes forced white women to engage with their new, foreign surroundings in a direct way. While not all comments made by settler women about their servants were positive or appreciative, these servants nevertheless improved women's lives in many ways. For instance, when Harriet Rabone was awaiting the arrival of her Dutch servant she wrote to her friend Agnes with anticipation, "When my little Hollander arrives I mean to be a lady and will write too much to you then."⁷

Servants provided settler women with the luxury of free time. Harriet Bowe's staccato diary entries that simply list daily events, are studded with references to the servant's activities, "Koos shot large dog"⁸ or "Tom found Katinau tipsy and beating his wife."⁹ These events gave texture to Mrs. Bowe's otherwise bland, lonely days. In Mrs. Armstrong's description of her baby daughter's death, the degree to which her servants helped and supported her is made apparent by her constant references to their presence. Ellen Case employed a string of child minders to help her care for her young children. By her own admission, these servants were indispensable, permitting her to engage in other activities such as attending church, teaching catechism or sewing.

⁷ Rabone Records, p.109

⁸ Harriet Bowe, 28 May 1854

⁹ *Ibid*, 17 April 1854

A focal point of communal activity was religion, and more specifically, church-going. In the face of anxiety about the challenges of colonial life, religion offered many women solace and comfort, interpreting the hardships they endured could be borne as ‘God’s will’ or the wishes of Providence and therefore more easily borne. For those women who came to South Africa on missionary or church work, the complexities surrounding their presence on the frontier were quickly resolved by claims that they had been sent to do God’s work, and thus any difficulties or suffering would be endured for His sake. For instance, after walking in a beautiful garden, the missionary Mary Taylor wrote, “This is just such a retreat as I longed for years ago, but I suppose it would not have been good for me or I should have had it.”¹⁰ In order to make sense of her not having what she desired, Mrs. Taylor had to convince herself that it would not have been good for her. Victorian women were especially prone to this self-effacing brand of Christianity which abdicated all responsibility to God. This was exaggerated on the frontier where women frequently felt more out of control than ever.

Upon arriving in South Africa, settlers were often struck by the uncertainty and possible danger that lay ahead, but by focusing on Christian purpose, some women were able to allay their feelings of fear and apprehension. A sense of being chosen by God to perform his work created a legitimate space for white women in Africa, as Mary Moffat’s 1820 sea voyage journal, already cited to illustrate Mrs. Moffat’s anxiety about her role as a missionary, reveals,

Last night by moonlight my feelings were sweetly sad, I considered my situation literally a pilgrim, a stranger, a sojourner, and viewed heaven only as my home. Painful indeed it is to think that a long time at least must elapse before I see one of you, but when I

¹⁰ Mary Taylor, 11 November 1872

consider that through grace [illegible word] I have been enabled to forsake you and follow the leadings of Providence, even over the mighty deep, I am lost in wonder and amazement.¹¹

In spite of her sadness at being separated from her parents, Mary Moffat reaffirmed her commitment to missionary work by remembering that she was simply following the “leadings of Providence.” Her religious convictions helped her to come to terms with what she had lost, and what she had to face in her future. Similarly, when Sarah Childs (later Amm) was en route to South Africa in 1862, she noted in her diary, “I think it is right, and feel I am obeying God’s will in the step I am taking.”¹²

Christian rhetoric played a comparatively small part in the lives of *settler* women, however attending church and church-related functions was a vital focus of social and communal life on the frontier. Church provided women (and men) with purpose and structure, and was the symbolic centre of the white community, just as the Anglican cathedral of St. Michael and St. George stands symbolically in the centre of Grahamstown’s High Street. Associated with Christian virtue and the British middle-class values of hard work, the nuclear family and conventional morality, the church operated as a psychological anchor for settlers as they engaged with their alienating new surroundings. Church services offered a familiar ritual re-enacted with reassuring regularity and precision. Almost all settler women made reference to church-going.

¹¹ Mary Moffat, p.7

¹² Sarah Childs, Thursday 21 August 1862, p.6

Each Sunday entry reveals either “No service,” or “Went to church.”¹³ The familiarity of the church service comforted and fortified settler women, it was an aspect of their former lives that could be duplicated in the Eastern Cape. When Frances Armstrong’s young daughter died in 1854, Mrs. Armstrong recorded every detail of the child’s funeral in her diary, and emphasized the importance she attached to the regular English service, which contrasted sharply with the overgrown, unkempt, unEnglish graveyard,

Something struck me as very cold and unlike England and afterwards I remembered that no bell tolled. We went on to the cemetery, such a scene of desolation I never witnessed. The rank growth of weeds of the hot climate perfectly unchecked, the paths a mass of weeds, not a tree planted. I could not help feeling pained and distressed at my darling having such a resting place. But the service happily was the same as in England and the sun shone beautifully.¹⁴

Even though she was “distressed” by the untamed, uncontrolled African graveyard which threatened her English sensibilities, the English funeral service marked continuity in the face of jarring discontinuity and dislocation.

Women located on mission stations frequently had to attend church services conducted in Xhosa, or ‘Kaffir’, as some referred to it. This meant that the comforting continuity of the church ritual was diminished, as Ellen Case felt in Tsolo, in the 1890s. She ruefully expressed her frustrations, “I went to Matins and Evensong - took Philip and Nora to Evensong - it is a

¹³ Harriet Bowe, various entries

¹⁴ Matthew, H.M. Grahamstown Diocese Historical Notes Volume 1. Grahamstown: Diocesan Office, 1957, p.62

short service. The morning seems a very long service as I cannot understand it.”¹⁵ After three months of living at Tsolo, she re-encountered a fragment of familiarity, “English celebration in church at 7:30 - the first English one we have had in church.”¹⁶ In spite of most of the services she attended being in Xhosa, Ellen Case still derived some sense of order, pleasure and comfort from attending church, as type, time and language of services were recorded with precision in her diary. Thus, Christian ideology, with its emphasis on obedience to God’s will and endurance of suffering, as well as the actual activity of church-going, helped settler women to contend with the heathenish, isolating frontier, and to make sense of their place on it.

One key to settler women’s coping mechanisms was to transform the alien Other into something knowable and recognisable, difference into sameness. Nowhere was this more literally practiced than on the actual landscape of the frontier. The Eastern Cape countryside was the antithesis of its English counterpart in every respect - expansive, untamed, rugged, semi-arid. Various settler women described it as, “most dreary”¹⁷, “very little variety in the scenery”¹⁸, “wild, grand beauty”¹⁹, “beautiful in the extreme”²⁰, and “dry, desolate country.”²¹ They usually made

¹⁵ Ellen Case, Sunday 17 February 1889

¹⁶ *Ibid*, Sunday 31 March 1889

¹⁷ Mary Taylor

¹⁸ Eliza Dugmore, Tuesday 7 November 1871

¹⁹ Sarah Childs, p.16

²⁰ Frances Armstrong, p.75

²¹ Johanna Moresby-White, p.28

admiring remarks about the landscape only when it measured up to English standards of beauty - when it was very green or majestic, or was flowering, or had been well cultivated. In her thesis on the effects of British colonialism on the Zuurveld environment, Jill Payne emphasizes British settlers' perception of their East Cape surroundings as alien and in need of civilizing. Payne shows how the nineteenth century British cultural mindset came to be reflected in the environmental changes that took place in the Zuurveld during the course of the 1800s. The central tenet of her argument, "In order to make the Zuurveld less alien and more familiar, every attempt was made to reproduce there the norms and institutions of Britain - to recreate 'home'," explains some of the behaviour and attitudes of settler women.²² Many settler women gardened, either for pleasure or to cultivate food, but the manner in which this was done reflected their desire to modify the African environment into something approximating an English garden. This represents a further tactic deployed by settler women in their efforts to cope with their frontier existence.

Harriet Rabone was a fervent gardener, who grew fruit and vegetables to earn extra money, and attempting to grow English flowers for decorative, sentimental reasons. She wrote to her friend Agnes, requesting seeds from England, mostly for delicate English flowering plants that were totally out of place in the semi-desert of Graaff-Reinet. Although Harriet "revel[led]" in the climate, her standard of a beautiful garden remained very much determined by the English

²² Payne, Jill "Re-creating Home: British Colonialism, Culture and the Zuurveld Environment in the Nineteenth Century." Masters Thesis. Rhodes University, 1998, p.162

model.²³ She prided herself on her seed acquisitions, and thanked Agnes profusely for her help to “a poor colonist.” By establishing a pretty English garden in Graaff-Reinet, Harriet positioned herself in the following way, “I felt quite merry all day after receiving your little packet [of seeds] . . . then told everybody I met during the day of my good fortune, and I know they envied me my English friend more than the seeds.”²⁴ With this affectionate compliment to her friend, Harriet affirmed herself as an English woman by emphasizing her links to England, both human and botanical.

Many settler women attempted to recapture the familiarity of England and all things associated with home by involving themselves in leisure activities that they had enjoyed before immigrating to South Africa. Often these activities were regarded as proper accomplishments for Victorian ladies, and by practicing them on the frontier, settler women not only alleviated their boredom and loneliness, but reaffirmed their allegiance to a particular set of codes and patterns of behaviour allocated to English women. Such activities included piano playing, attending public lectures, dancing and sketching. For instance, whilst travelling in the East Cape interior with her husband, Frances Armstrong stopped off at a farm house near Fort Beaufort, which impressed her with its Englishness, “The house was in perfect order and good taste, a handsome piano in the drawing room on which the daughter, a simple mannered and lady-like girl played with good taste. The host gave us an excellent luncheon served up in true English style.”²⁵ Domestic order,

²³ Rabone Records, p.120

²⁴ *Ibid*, p.117

²⁵ Matthew Grahamstown, p.68

good taste, feminine accomplishments and Englishness were all closely bound up for Mrs. Armstrong, and her idealization of the daughter as an exemplary Victorian woman show her endorsement of the ruling order, and her desire to see it replicated on the frontier. The daughter demonstrated her loyalty to conventional gender and national ideals with her lady-like manners, her piano-playing, and by serving up an English-style luncheon. Thus women maintained continuity between race, class and gender divisions at 'home', and on the frontier.

While the majority of settler women coped with frontier adversities by attempting to re-create home in South Africa, a few co-operated with the local populace in order to sustain themselves. Although not a widespread coping mechanism, some women recognised that a modification of their beliefs and habits was a necessary survival tool on the frontier. This was not always a matter of choice. Martha Webber's trading existence forced her to work harmoniously with the black customers whose patronage she depended on. This represents an example of cooperation as a coping mechanism. Instead of rejecting African customs, some settler women took the opportunity of incorporating them into their lives. Mrs. Armstrong, for instance, was willing to sample 'African' food,

The sour milk which is first shaken in a skin, and then poured into the baskets (neither of them being ever cleaned), tastes very much like cream cheese which has been kept rather too long. The children liked it much.²⁶

In spite of her obvious wariness about the cleanliness of the sour milk-making process, Mrs. Armstrong embraced the new dish with a certain open-mindedness, while domesticating its

²⁶ *Ibid*, p.79

foreignness by likening it to cream cheese.

Another way in which women integrated aspects of the frontier with their existing selves was through language. Whether it was the use of Xhosa or Afrikaans words, the incorporation of non-English terms into their vocabularies, reflected an adaptability and tolerance on the part of some settler women. Johanna Moresby-White wrote in her journal, “‘warte bickie” [*wag ‘n bietjie* - ‘wait a bit’] as the Dutchman says.”²⁷ Words such as ‘laagers,’ ‘kraals’ and ‘veld’ are commonplace in settler women’s texts, and indicate an engagement with their cultural surroundings and an inclination to accommodate some aspects of that world. Even the virulently racist Mary Barber believed that historical and ‘native’ place names should be retained, rather than replacing them with colonial ones such as New England, New London or East London.²⁸

A sense of humour is not normally a quality associated with Victorian women, who were required to be of quiet and sober habits. Some settler women did display a sense of humour, which undoubtedly helped them to diffuse the tensions to which they were subject. Generally speaking, younger settler women were more able to laugh at their circumstances than older women, who tended to be fixed in the role of helpless, miserable invalids. Eliza Cousins’ letters to her siblings in England, written when she was thirty two years old, are punctuated with silly jokes and teasing remarks. Frequently she wrote these letters in the company of her brother Thomas, whose grumpy, intractable ‘manliness’ Eliza liked to make fun of. To her sister she

²⁷ Johanna Moresby-White, p.7

²⁸ Mary Barber, p.98

wrote,

I have laughed out two or three times over this letter. Thomas is sitting beside me reading. He breaks off every now and then from the book to me as if he thought me very silly . . . This brother Thomas is the most lazy fellow you have ever heard tell of. He will not write. He says he will if I will tell him what to say and all sorts of nonsense. Now I will tell you how much I am teasing him. Take care not to let him read much. Just by way of punishment I keep asking him how you spell this and that word, so all the words that are properly spelt are those he has told me.²⁹

With this animated playfulness, Eliza was able to make light of her new and difficult circumstances. In the same letter, written soon after her arrival in South Africa, she implored her sister to write more often, indicating that she experienced some difficulty adapting to her new environment.

Eliza Dugmore, another a young settler woman, employed a wry sense of humour tinged with irony, to contend with some of her frontier experiences. On a trip to the diamond fields at the age of eighteen, her party stopped at the home of a Mr. Thomas. Eliza undercut her own narrative with self-deprecation, “Mr. Thomas has a very nice garden and the most beautiful poplar walk that I have ever seen (considering that I have never seen one before).”³⁰ After arriving at the diamond fields, she remarked somewhat sarcastically, “I have heard it said that there are a great many ladies at the Fields. It has not fallen to my lot to see many.”³¹ In fact, Eliza was extremely disappointed by her trip to the fields, which she found dusty, disease-ridden

²⁹ Eliza Cousins, 22 June 1851

³⁰ Eliza Dugmore, Friday 27 October 1871

³¹ *Ibid*, Friday 24 November 1871

and noisy. In her comment about the absence of ‘ladies’, connected in her mind with civilization and refinement, she attempted to diffuse her disappointment by implying that her subjective experience of the trip may have just been a case of bad-luck.

Aside from the more direct coping mechanisms discussed above, settler women negotiated their frontier experiences through the actual act of diary-writing. The cathartic benefits of keeping a journal, especially for women who had limited access to normal social interaction, cannot be over-estimated. Since the Victorian emphasis on emotional restraint denied many women the opportunity to voice their grievances and sorrows out loud, they instead recorded these repressed feelings in their journals. Davis argues that for pioneer women, the diary “helped the author preserve her mental equilibrium.”³² A bridge between the past and present, the frontier diary “mediated between feelings of fear and estrangement in the chaos of early trail and settlement days.”³³ As mentioned earlier, settler women’s diaries contain little emotionalism or personal revelations, with the result that the brief, controlled entries written about specially painful or moving incidents, are rendered all the more powerful and revealing. Such is the case of Mrs. Armstrong’s account of the death of her baby daughter, Ruth.

Mrs. Armstrong enumerated with precision and care the particulars of Ruth’s short illness, and after her death, described in meticulous detail the practical arrangements made for her funeral

³² Davis, Gayle R. “Women’s Frontier Diaries: writing for good reason.” Women’s Studies 14 (1) (1987), p.10

³³ *Ibid*, p.10

service. Her entry on the day of Ruth's death ends, "She died about 10 minutes past three. About this day I can say no more."³⁴ After attending her daughter's funeral, Frances Armstrong sadly noted, "We returned to our home where she was not."³⁵ [Underlining in original] These two expressive remarks are the only indications of the mother's great loss. However, the fact that they were written down, along with the minutiae of the events surrounding Ruth's death, surely helped Mrs. Armstrong to give shape and voice to her grief. Her diary was the receptacle for her unconstrained emotions, as well a space in which she could organise and clarify her thoughts and feelings. The amount of space Mrs. Armstrong dedicated to writing about Ruth's death signifies how deeply it affected her. As Lensink has stressed, "intensity of experience is usually signaled by quantity of language rather than by metaphor."³⁶

When her sister died in 1885, Julia Bowker described her journey to be at Emily's bedside, and then Emily's funeral and all its trimmings. Unlike Mrs. Armstrong, she revealed no emotion at all in her diary, but instead used its pages as a vehicle for remembering the mechanics of her sister's death, "She was buried on Monday 18th in the cemetery close by belonging to the English church . . . [she] had more than 25 lovely wreaths of flowers placed on her coffin, which was of teak wood - a beauty. On the plate was her day of birth and death, with words 'Now she is at Rest.' "³⁷ This is the last mention Mrs. Bowker made of her sister. Her rather morbid,

³⁴ Matthew Grahamstown, p.61

³⁵ *Ibid*, p.63

³⁶ Lensink, Judy Nolte "Expanding the boundaries of criticism: the diary as female autobiography." Women's Studies 14 (1) (1987), p.41

³⁷ Julia Bowker, 17 May 1885

inappropriate preoccupation with the flowers and coffin was in keeping with Victorian sentimentalism, but these details also disguised any of the real emotion Julia Bowker may have felt at the death of her sister. It was only through the medium of the diary or journal that this level of emotional control could be fully realised, thus making the diary an important coping mechanism in the lives of settler women.

A sense of purpose and usefulness kept at bay the feelings of strangeness and alienation that afflicted many settler women. By working in a formal job, or simply carrying out needful tasks, women felt that they contributed to the settlement community, instead of feeling overpowered or helpless. Since few women had access to paid employment in the formal sector, most occupied themselves with domestic work or jobs associated with the 'feminine' traits of caring and nurturing. Often this work related to caring for the sick. By taking on the role of caring, compassionate, motherly nurses, women provided themselves with an identity as 'the giver', and convinced themselves of their indispensable value. The importance attached to 'being needed' is amply illustrated in the closing remarks of Martha Webber's memoirs,

I am proud to think that it was in my power to help so many people in sickness and other ways, in the days when I was strong and hearty. Doctors were practically unknown luxuries in those pioneering times, and so anyone who was willing to act as midwife to the young mothers was greatly filling a much needed service. Many was the poor mother I helped through that trying period.³⁸

Mrs. Webber obviously derived a certain satisfaction and sense of self-worth from her informal work as a midwife. By establishing her identity as a nurturer and a useful person, she was better

³⁸ Martha Webber, p.42

equipped to endure the loneliness and poverty that plagued her all her life. Working women like Harriet Rabone and Eliza Cousins suffered less the alienation and disaffection of many other, less active women. Mrs. Oertel and Julia Bowker are examples of women who had little they could call their own, other than their ill-health and their sons.

The stereotype of women as selfless, dutiful helpers was sustained as much by men as by women themselves. Mary Taylor's 1873 diary, written while she assisted her brother at the Healdtown mission station, reveals the extent to which she based her identity on nursing the sick. After a man she had nursed died, she lamented, "I miss the grateful eyes, and the clasp of the dying hand."³⁹ The gratitude of the invalid endorsed her self-image as a benevolent 'Angel of the House.' Later, after meeting an influential inspector who happened to be ill, she confided in her journal, "It was a pleasure to meet so cultivated and splendid person, but he seemed in bad health and I longed to nurse him up."⁴⁰ The use of the word "longed" suggests a sexual impulse that Mary was unable to acknowledge and was thus forced to transform into the more innocuous urge to help and care. Repressed desires aside, her comments indicate her need to feel appreciated and wanted by others.

During the South African war, Kimberley was besieged by Boer forces, and Florence Brice was a member of the 'Ladies Services' that fed and assisted British troops passing through Kimberley by rail. Although 1899 is beyond the time frame of this study, the satisfaction Florence obtained

³⁹ Mary Taylor, 7 January 1873

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 20 January 1873

from doing useful, appreciated work epitomises the contrast between housebound, unhappy women and productive, contented women. Florence wrote a journal of her patriotic efforts to help the British soldiers by providing them with sandwiches and tea. In this domestic capacity, Florence felt she contributed to winning the war, and her sandwich-making she showed her support for white patriarchal authority embodied by the British ruling elite. During the chaos and disruption of the Kimberley siege, Florence derived some satisfaction and solace from doing what she perceived to be necessary and important work. She carefully recorded the gratitude and thanks of the soldiers in her journal,

as we were going away we were stopped by an officer who thanked us “for being so good to my men” and then by a private who begged us not to go just yet as they wanted to give us a cheer when the train steamed out. It was rather formidable to stand and wait to be cheered out. It was only a few seconds and it really seemed to give them pleasure.⁴¹

The cheering soldiers affirmed the motherly/ patriotic identity that Florence constructed for herself. This identity, and the sanction of her male compatriots certainly improved Florence Brice’s ability to contend with the confusion and hardships of the war.

In many respects, all pioneer women’s responses to the frontier were coping mechanisms. Every action and reaction of these women can be considered an effort to come to terms with their new surroundings, and the challenges they faced as white Victorian women on the East Cape frontier. In this analysis, illness and its accompanying metaphors, as well as fear and racism, can be regarded as coping mechanisms. As argued in chapter five, illness can be read as both a response to and a potential solution to frontier conditions. However, a focus on illness as a coping

⁴¹ Florence Brice, 23 September 1900

mechanism encourages the perception of women as victims, and draws attention away from the more direct means that women employed to survive. It is these more direct means of reading, writing and reading letters, keeping diaries, gardening, working, assisting others, and attending church, that this chapter has highlighted. Settler women who desperately craved continuity and familiarity favoured any actions or activities that replicated aspects of 'home' in the Eastern Cape. Through these means, settler women attempted to construct and maintain a secure identity for themselves, based on the cultural values that were familiar to them. It was from the position of a stable self-image that settler women were best engaged with the difficulties they encountered.

CONCLUSION

To draw any general conclusions based on the writings of in excess of twenty settler women, who resided in diverse locations, and whose narratives span a period of seventy years would be to oversimplify the experiences of these women, and reduce their perceptions to the sort of bland, static stereotypes found in so much existing literature on the Eastern Cape settlers. Nevertheless, common images and themes do emerge from the diaries and letters of these frontierswomen, and these are unified by the overarching trend amongst settler women to maintain their identities as English 'ladies' at the expense of adjusting to their new environment. Past historians have emphasized the ability of the British settlers to bravely adapt and acclimatise themselves to the Eastern Cape, without acknowledging that this adaptation was less about an actual engagement with Otherness, and more about replicating British culture in Africa.

Replicating British culture was precisely the task assigned to white settler women. By inscribing the frontier with the Victorian values of respectability, hard work, decorum and refinement, women attempted to domesticate the frontier, to render it tame, safe and familiar, instead of frighteningly unknown and uncivilized. In other words, the maintenance of social boundaries, drawn along racial, class and gender lines, was an imperative of settler women. This role was not without its anxieties. It involved a constant struggle to assert an outmoded, inappropriate identity on a hostile, alien environment. The resulting dislocation experienced by settler women is reflected in their repeated encounters with fear, dis-ease and loneliness.

During the course of the nineteenth-century, the Eastern Cape frontier shifted, leaving white-secured territory behind it, and unchartered, 'uncivilized' territory ahead. Settler women's experiences were shaped to a large extent by their position relative to the frontier. The literal and metaphorical split of the frontier was the dominant force affecting the lives of pioneer women. Thus, women such as Martha Webber, who traded in inaccessible areas not yet under British control, or women such as Harriet Bowe and Mary Oertel, who both lived on remote farms, perceived their circumstances and surroundings very differently from women located in small urban settings, such as Francis Armstrong or Harriet Rabone.

White women came to South Africa explicitly to make the frontier habitable. Their domestic influence was intentionally mobilised to bring about stability in the Eastern Cape, and to put a stop to the widespread miscegenation that preceded their arrival. As the centre of the nuclear family, white women were intended to entrench white rule by bringing security, respectability and British cultural values to Africa. As a result, the frontier tended to lead to a rigidifying of conventional gender roles, with women locked into the traditional stereotypes of mother, housekeeper and wife even more than in Britain. While the Industrial Revolution provided British women with increased opportunities for paid employment, settler women found it difficult to obtain lucrative work outside the home. In the absence of sufficient schools, mothers in frontier environments had to shoulder all the responsibility for socialising and educating their children. Women's dependence on their husbands' ability to care for and protect them was amplified by the difficulties they encountered on the frontier, as demonstrated by Martha Webber's regretted decision to remarry.

Women exerted their influence over their environment largely through their domestic activities, which they sought to maintain, especially in the face of adversity or opposition. Familiar rituals of cooking and cleaning were significantly more important on ox-wagon trips or in rustic, unsophisticated mission stations, than in established towns. By reenacting the homely rites of tea-making or bathing, women not only affirmed their identities as refined English ladies; they also made a contribution to the civilizing process by imparting the customs of the colonizer to the colonized. A few women, notably Harriet Rabone, found domesticity a stifling burden, although most women embraced this role, which ensured a degree of continuity in a world that was so jarringly discontinuous.

Part of the threatening difference and discontinuity that settler women perceived on the frontier was embodied by black Africans. Many of the racist stereotypes that are still a part of some white South Africans' ideological framework, originated on the frontier. Fear of loss of racial identity prompted most settler women to adopt an Othering stance, which reduced Africans to fixed, knowable images by means of a normalising discourse that eliminated the individuality and diversity that threatened white hegemony and domination. In spite of prevailing stereotypes of women as nurturing and compassionate, settler women's writing reveals their complicity in the development of South Africa's racial discourse. Indeed, many women display virulent racism when writing about Africans, whom they cast as either mute, submissive children, or as savage, aggressive, untamed and immoral. These racist images tended to rigidify over time, rather than diminish as a result of increased contact between colonizers and colonized.

White women generally wrote more sympathetically of black women than of black men, who they perceived as lazy and careless. Stereotypes of black men depicted them as menacingly lustful, and in constant danger of compromising the sanctity of white women, from whom they were kept distinctly separate. Some, like Mrs. Stormont and Mrs. Armstrong viewed black women as hard workers, who bore the double burden of maternal responsibility and agricultural labour. On the whole though, all Africans were depicted as predictably disloyal, dishonest, lazy, libidinous and thieving. These fixed images provided settler women with the illusion of being in control of the seemingly uncontrollable, and given the lack of power white Victorian women experienced in almost all spheres of their lives, it is not surprising that they chose to wield power over those they viewed as their natural inferiors.

Another component of the racist discourse characterising settler women's personal writing is their depiction of Afrikaners, and especially Afrikaner women. While English-speaking women defined themselves as refined, cultivated, genteel and respectably middle-class, they portrayed Afrikaner women as crass, vulgar, coarse and unladylike. Indeed, in the minds of some, like Anna Bowker, Africans and Afrikaners were equally brutish and uncivilized, which suggests the two very different modes Boers and Britons employed to contend with the frontier. As Mostert has emphasised, Boers absorbed the customs and traditions of the Eastern Cape, and by borrowing from existing frontier inhabitants, adapted and survived. British settlers frowned on this practice as 'going native,' and instead attempted to survive by directly transplanting their values and customs onto an entirely foreign landscape. Maintaining and advancing British ideals, social systems and ways of life lay at the centre of every settler woman's life.

Solitude and loneliness were two consequences of women's efforts to perpetuate British social systems in Africa. The frequent references to loneliness in settler women's writing indicate that they did not triumph over their environment as heroically as the settlerist school has imagined. Upholding accepted divisions of race and class was vital for the maintenance of their identities as white, middle-class women, thus limiting settler women's opportunities for friendship, especially when they were located on remote farms. In other words, the loneliness expressed by these women was not simply a need for companionship, but a craving for familiarity and sameness. In their own minds, this need could only be satisfied by someone of their own race, class, nationality and perhaps even gender. Such a person would not just alleviate their solitude, but buttress their identities as they came under threat on the frontier. Loneliness was therefore also a symptom of cultural isolation, and was heightened at culturally significant times such as Easter, Christmas, New Year and birthdays.

The Victorian ideology which confined women to the private sphere of domesticity, contributed to the solitude experienced by settler women. Limited opportunities to work in the public domain, meant that most women were housebound, and stifled by a daily routine of boring, repetitive household tasks. Thus, traditional roles also left women isolated and lonely. Mrs. Oertel's remark about being "quite a prisoner" while taking care of her pregnant daughter reflects this. Traditional roles and dependency relationships were reinforced by loneliness, as women sought comfort from their husbands, children and particularly their sons. Individual women's solitude led not only to a strengthening of these kinship bonds, but also to the creation of a unified, coherent settler identity, based on their common need for sameness and support.

A unified settler identity did not exempt women from a sense of vulnerability and lack of control at the frighteningly unfamiliar surroundings in which they lived. Illness offered some women a means with which to escape the harsh realities of frontier life, while retaining, if not promoting their identities as frail, sensitive, lady-like Englishwomen. The Victorian sickroom was associated with order and comfort, and was a potential haven from the demands of family, or the external, public world. Thus, settler women's illnesses may be read as a surrender to their environment, and also a potential solution to the difficult, conflicting expectations elicited by that environment. Within limits, women manipulated their surroundings with illness, allowing them a degree of control over their circumstances. For instance, Ellen Case precipitated her family's relocation to Cradock with her ill-health.

Illness also offered a potential solution for loneliness, as it evoked the sympathy and attention of friends and relatives, and bestowed on women a sense of specialness. It provided the overworked mother or housewife with a socially sanctioned excuse for evading domestic responsibility. As a caricature of ideal Victorian womanhood (quiet, feeble, submissive), invalidism also offered women the opportunity of reaffirming their femininity, and in the face of the vulnerability and confusion brought about by the frontier, enabled women to regain a "simple and coherent role."¹ In this analysis, while illness can be interpreted as a coping mechanism of sorts, it also represents a failure to actively engage with the external Otherness of the Eastern Cape.

¹ Herndl, Diane Price Invalid Women: Figuring Feminine Illness in American Fiction and Culture, 1840 - 1940. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993, p.10

Creating familiarity and predictability were the key coping mechanisms employed by settler women, although these took a variety of different forms, some subtle and others more overt. Illness, loneliness and racial Othering were indirect coping mechanisms that emerged as settler women encountered their new surroundings, but women also employed more direct strategies to contend with the frontier. From planting English flowers in African gardens, to reading English books and newspapers, settler women attempted to instate England on the frontier at every turn. Letters from 'home' also represented an important emotional link with the familiar, as well as easing many women's feelings of solitude and disconnectedness. Christian doctrines of sacrifice and endurance helped religious women like Mary Moffat and Francis Armstrong make sense of their place in South Africa. In addition, familiar church rituals and religious ceremonies provided many women with a stable, reassuring anchor in the seeming disorder and confusion of frontier life. The church also formed the basis for some women's community or social lives. A few women coped by integrating some aspects of the Eastern Cape into their identities, such the use of Afrikaans or Xhosa words, or trading cooperatively with Africans.

While many older settler women remained despondent and fearful about their circumstances, a few younger women displayed humour in dealing with their environment. Eliza Dugmore and Eliza Cousins both used humour to make light of difficult or painful occurrences. Finally, the actual act of diary-writing represented an important coping mechanism in the lives of settler women. It provided them with a space in which to reflect on their situations. By writing down their perceptions and experiences, it allowed them to make better sense of the unfamiliar and unpredictable. Diaries were also cathartic in that they permitted women who were normally

encouraged to repress and deny their feelings, to freely express their emotions. Settler women's diaries also acted as negotiators between the past and present, giving shape and meaning to experiences that might otherwise have been disjunctive and disturbingly incomprehensible.

It is perhaps misleading to isolate settler women's coping mechanisms, as if these were a discrete aspect of their lives. Each word, action and reaction of settler women should be understood as attempts to come to terms with their environment, and to gain mastery over its threatening inhabitants. Most of these words and actions centered on staying the same, on maintaining their identities of white, middle-class, English-speaking ladies at all costs. Fear of compromise of identity, as well as fear of actual physical attack conditioned white women's responses to the frontier. These were characterised by a resistance to change and a determination to obliterate difference and diversity by replicating British values and customs in Africa, in spite of the damaging consequences both to themselves and to the wider society. Had white women arrived on the frontier with an openness to change, and a willingness to engage with the Eastern Cape landscape and its people, a reciprocal process of acculturation may have been initiated, with untold improvements in settler women's ability to truly adapt to the frontier.

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