

AN ELUSIVE HOME: RACHEL CALOF, INDOORS AND OUT

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ABSTRACT

Rachel Calof's Story: Jewish Homesteader on the Northern Plains (Ed. J. Sanford Rikoon, Indiana University Press, 1995) is a first-person memoir of farming in North Dakota from 1894-1917, based on Rachel Calof's Yiddish manuscript. I traced this text from inception to publication, especially the translation and editing process, comparing a new translation of the Yiddish manuscript with the English publication. This article focuses primarily on the issues of space and the transition to a new environment. Rachel Kahn Calof immigrated alone to the United States and married into the Calof family. Resources were extremely limited and the families were forced to live in close proximity, often sharing shanties with extended family members and even the animals, during the winter. Examples of her adjustments to the environment, transitions and the rhetoric of frontier settlement are developed in the context of other pioneering narratives and theories from literary studies, history and geography.

In 1936, when Rachel Bella Calof was about sixty years old she sat down, perhaps at a kitchen table, and started writing the details of her life in long-hand. She wrote in Yiddish, vividly describing her life as a motherless child in a Jewish village in the Ukraine. She says, "When I reached the age of eight, I had already fully assumed the role of protector of my brothers and sister."¹ Her loyalty to her siblings and their experiences with a stepmother are detailed, as is her father's move to America and the consequent separation of the Kahn children: "our father decided to break up his home and give up his children. His plan was to go to America as soon as he could get rid of us. He proceeded with his plans to dispose of us."² Rachel Bella goes to her paternal grandfather's, and later to a wealthy aunt located closer to her siblings. Her father's boat apparently sinks. As an eighteen year old, Rachel Bella recognizes that her "prospects for the future were now very poor."³ In a combination of accepting her fate and expecting God to provide, she says, "meanwhile God sits above and sees all that happens below, and God finally understood that He had to do something in my behalf. His plan for me was quite

complicated."⁴ She realizes that marriage to a stranger, arranged for her by a great-uncle, would be better than staying, so she bravely uses another girl's passport and makes the journey. Abraham Calof, her fiancé, meets her in New York and they prepare to go to North Dakota where land is available to homesteaders. One of his brothers has been there, along with their cousins, for the past three years. Abe stayed in New York and apparently earned the passages for his parents and younger brother, who arrived three months before Rachel Bella.

My research on the Calof manuscript contributes a new translation allowing us to hear her original voice, even more than in her well-known book *Rachel Calof's Story: Jewish Homesteader on the Northern Plains* (Indiana University Press 1995). For this article, however, I will rely primarily on the published materials and texts accessible in the archives. The Calof family is now reserving the original manuscript for future research and I no longer have permission to base my work upon the Yiddish version or the translation thereof.

Although Rachel Bella describes her first meeting with Abe in New York as awkward, they nonetheless agree to marry and travel to North Dakota. Her first impression of the homestead is

¹ Rachel Calof. *Rachel Calof's Story: Jewish Homesteader on the Northern Plains*. Ed. J. Sanford Rikoon. (Indiana University Press, 1995), 1.

² Calof, 4.

³ Calof, 8.

⁴ Calof, 8-9.

one of poverty and despair. While she certainly did not come from wealth in the Ukraine, she is very harsh in her description of her new relatives' situation. Her first impression of her future brother-in-law, at the train station: "I felt a sinking feeling when I saw this man [Charlie, Abraham's older brother]. He was quite dirty and badly dressed with rags on his feet in place of shoes. He looked like a subnormal person to me, a suspicion which was confirmed the moment he began to talk."⁵ She is even more critical of the women:

The appearance of these girls was truly shocking. They wore men's shoes and a rough looking garment. Only common peasants wore such clothes in Russia. I was dismayed to see such attire worn by Jewish women. It was indecent. Poor as I had been all my life, I had always worn a dress like any self-respecting Jewish woman.⁶

She does not realize that they had no shoes and wear the men's shoes in her honour. Their living quarters are "dismal" and she confronts the fact that she is facing poverty and conditions for which she is wholly unprepared. During the winter, a lack of fuel forces them not only to share the 12 x 14 foot shanty with her in-laws, brother-in-law, and a calf, but each family also keeps chickens under the bed. She writes about many of the better moments and she gives the impression of being a very spunky young woman. Religion seems to give her some familiar constraints and stability even though her new family members have different approaches to Jewish observance, whether birthing rituals or marriage customs. Much of the book is devoted to her almost constant condition of pregnancy; she realistically portrays the primitive conditions. Her alliance with her husband and their determination to build a home together increase as their family grows. A very short section of the book is devoted to their success; their move to St. Paul, Minnesota seems quite sudden and unexpected. Rachel Calof died in 1952.

The Yiddish manuscript survived in a trunk owned by Rachel's daughter, Elizabeth Calof Breitbord. In

⁵ Calof, 22. "Subnormal" is one of the words that triggered my search for the original manuscript. In Yiddish the word is "*bal agula*," loosely translated as "carriage driver;" however, the connotations are class-laden, implying a person with whom one does not associate.

⁶ Calof, 22.

the late 1970s, Elizabeth arranged for the translation into English by her second cousin Molly Shaw, while Rachel's son, Jacob, "compiled" the text "to put the story into a literary form".⁷ His English compilation was typed and distributed to family members and Jewish archives. J. Sanford Rikoon found this typed manuscript in the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati and worked with Jacob to edit the Indiana Press volume.⁸ In his Introduction Rikoon describes the manuscript as sixty-seven "exceptionally clear and clean" pages and, while he indicates that there were "particular difficulties" with the translation, in an unexamined and problematic statement he suggests that "we owe a great deal to Jacob Calof, who refused to use outsiders who might have changed any part of his mother's story and who would not have known her 'voice' and narrative style." Furthermore, Rikoon says "no passages were added or deleted from the original nor were any changes made in the content or chronology of her narrative."⁹

Rachel Calof's original Yiddish manuscript is currently held by her grandson, David Calof. There are over 250 pages in the original manuscript which is stored carefully in transparent plastic sleeves with the old paper somewhat crumbling and the pencil writing fading. The pages are written on both sides, with several numbering systems, including duplicate numbers. However, David Calof also has a manuscript that is sixty-seven pages long, on lined notebook paper, in ink and on one side of the page.¹⁰ This sixty-seven page ink

⁷ Jacob Calof. Unpublished letter. Undated. St. Paul: Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest.

⁸ I investigated these original manuscripts.

⁹ Rikoon, Introduction, xii.

¹⁰ In the Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest Archives there is a letter from Elizabeth Breitbord which possibly explains the recopied segment:

My mother many years ago started a book on her own telling about her personal life. A book that's stained with tears, as a bride of 18; the hardships; the personal troubles. She sent it to the *Forward* newspaper who were very interested in printing it in serials but she had written it on both sides of the paper and they couldn't accept it that way and there was no one to re-write it. I kept it as a very dear reminder of her. (Breitbord n.pag.)

I have not yet been able to verify this with *The Forward*. Nonetheless, the manuscript apparently in its earliest form was written on both sides of the page in pencil and this was found to be unacceptable for newspaper serialization.

manuscript is described in the 1995 Indiana University Press publication as the entire text. While the ink manuscript corresponds most consistently with the wording and paragraph structure of the quarter of the book it parallels, the decreasing correlation of the Yiddish manuscript with the Indiana Press publication is not simply a function of translation of the Yiddish manuscript. Significant material is added as well as deleted. What happened next can only be conjectured, based on archival evidence in St. Paul. Jacob wrote an undated letter which is preserved in the Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest archives in the file with a copy of the Yiddish manuscript verifying that his version, while based on the manuscript, was indeed his “literary” version of his mother’s work.

While Rachel Calof’s settlement experiences certainly differ from the western trail narratives, ongoing textual analysis and historical research of those texts, along with the interrogation of “class, life cycle and role expectations” provide what Vera Norwood calls a “deeper reading of women’s lives on the frontier.”¹¹ With that in mind, I begin analysing Rachel Bella Calof’s approach to her environment.

Initially I was drawn to Rachel Calof’s exuberant account of the prairie which seemed to defy conventional examples of women’s frontier writings. Elizabeth Hampsten portrays women settling the American frontier in the nineteenth century as writing primarily about connections to other people and rarely about the landscape. She suggests “women describe where they are in

relation to other people more than according to a spot on the map.”¹² While the shanties were critical in the pioneer story, she says “women omit directions for getting to them.”¹³ Rachel Calof describes an early trip to town for filing homesteading papers and an opportunity to be alone with her fiancé, in glowing terms:

This was a memorable trip for us and I remember it vividly to this day. We drove with the three oxen, which were mutually owned by the three families, hitched to a wagon with was used in the field...Night fell at about the halfway point of the journey. The oxen were weary and we could go no further until dawn. It was cold and wet, but at least the cattle were enjoying the stop, eating their fill of the rich prairie grass. Our hotel room was roomy. Its floor was the never-ending prairie and the ceiling was the vast vault of the sky. It was very cold and the dew fell like rain. We had only an old quilt and a smaller cloth to cover us, and only a little food to eat.¹⁴

Until I read the new translation, I was certain this was a new female voice on the American prairie: who else was describing the vast surroundings with pleasure, as a “hotel room” with the “never-ending prairie” as a floor and the ceiling as a “vast vault of the sky”? I was disappointed when the translation, without Jacob’s “literacizing” voice, describes the journey with a visceral focus on the hunger and cold they experienced. Rather than the lyrical ecstasy, I found a straightforward description of the journey. One possibility is that the story was told and retold to her children. Another explanation for the divergent versions might be in her son’s tendency to romanticise and idealise his mother’s pioneer experience. Literary critic Annette Kolodny’s seminal works portray men and women’s different conceptualisations as they describe frontier landscapes. Women’s descriptions are more benign: “They dreamed, more modestly, of locating a home and a familiar human community within a cultivated garden.”¹⁵ I decided that I could continue to analyse Rachel

Ostensibly, the process of Rachel’s recopying work began from this motivation: there are sixty-seven pages copied out in ink on one side of the page, in answer to the requirements suggested by *The Forward*. No textual support was found explaining the cessation of the recopying. Rachel’s granddaughter, Joyce, when I told her I had found this memoir and mentioned *The Forward*, replied “Oh yes, but they wouldn’t publish it because it was written on both sides of the page.” Obviously this version of the tale was passed down in at least one branch of the family. However, this contradicts the contention in the published English version that Rachel Calof’s manuscript was a private, family document.

¹¹ Vera Norwood, “Crazy Quilt Lives: Frontier Sources for Southwestern Women’s Literature,” *The Desert is No Lady*, eds. Vera Norwood and Janice Monk (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997): 74.

¹² Elizabeth Hampsten, *Read This Only to Yourself: The Private Writings of Midwestern Women, 1880-1910* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 40.

¹³ Hampsten, 37.

¹⁴ Calof, 35-36.

¹⁵ Annette Kolodny, *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630 - 1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), xiii.

Calof's adaptations to and descriptions of her prairie environment, but that I would have to be constantly aware of the palimpsest nature and of the multiple voices of the Calof manuscripts and translations.

Before Rachel Calof arrives on the frontier, we see her as a new immigrant. In *The Promised Land*, set approximately twenty years after Rachel Calof settled in North Dakota, Mary Antin describes the "Old Country" as a place of the past and says that she comes from "having lived in 'medieval' Russian times to the 'modern' period of America."¹⁶ Rachel Calof, in this liminal state, seems to be a "time traveler"¹⁷ in the opposite direction. She comes from an established home, and though she was a maid in her aunt's home, she describes it as "truly a palace. It contained eight rooms and a number of hallways, all of which I was required to wash and wax each day."¹⁸ Many views of immigration to the United States consider the immigrants as improving their status and leaving "their small farms, crowded dwellings, and polluted cities for the virgin lands of the New World."¹⁹ Stephen Fender describes this transitional passage as "remov[ing] the initiates from their accustomed patterns of life to the *limen*, or border state, where old prerogatives and status are stripped away... out of all the disorder of the liminal process, the disruption of social and political status of the old world, a new harmony had emerged."²⁰ Obviously, Calof is motivated to improve her personal status, but landing in North Dakota is a "disruption" which does not advance her living conditions. Though being a maid with no future was humiliating for her, she was certainly accustomed to a standard of living that sharply contrasts to the home awaiting her in North Dakota.

After arriving in Devils Lake, Rachel Calof stays at her fiancé Abe's niece's house, a larger version of the shack that she would be calling home. The text says that at the niece's the "furniture consisted of a bed, a rough table made of wood slats, and two benches. The place was divided up into two

sections, the other being the kitchen which held a stove and beside it a heap of dried cow dung."²¹ Rachel Calof contends that her situation would be different: "I silently vowed that my home would be heated by firewood and that no animal waste would litter my floor. How little I knew. How innocent I was."²² Her tone is retrospective, perhaps regretting the judgmental first impressions, knowing that she later endures similar conditions. They are constrained to stay with this niece for the night and thus Calof's introduction to what the text calls "the greatest hardship of the pioneer life, the terrible crowding of many people into a small space."²³ Rachel Calof sleeps with the niece, while the niece's husband and Abe sleep "on straw in one corner" and the children have "another corner also piled with straw."²⁴

Unfortunately, what appeared to be a temporary overnight situation, Rachel Calof discovers the next morning, will continue in the same manner for the foreseeable future. Their shack is not completed and when they walk over to see it: "we broke out of the tall grass into a cleared space, and I beheld the building, twelve-by-fourteen feet... not only lacking a floor but roofless as well. Just four board walls, sitting in the middle of the trackless prairie."²⁵ Her fiancé says they will live with his parents until they get nails for a roof but that a "special place had been reserved in his parents' home which would be our own space."²⁶ The constellation of the family²⁷ offers us a view of the insider-outsider status of the new daughter-in-law to-be, and the physical alignment within the home defines her alien position.

The daytime arrangements are not encouraging. The beds are "hammered to the walls" and a table is "also hammered to a wall."²⁸ They move a bench for three people to sit at the table for meals, while the others sit on the beds. But they are not confined indoors in the daytime except during the winters. Outside, for all that we are told about the desolation, we imagine the setting with the houses

¹⁶ Werner Sollors, "Introduction," *The Promised Land*, Mary Antin, 1912 (New York: Penguin, 1997), xxix-xxx.

¹⁷ Sollors, xxix.

¹⁸ Calof, 5-6.

¹⁹ Tuan, 60.

²⁰ Stephen Fender, *Sea Changes: British Emigration and American Literature*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 132, 137.

²¹ Calof, 23.

²² Calof, 23.

²³ Calof, 24.

²⁴ Calof, 24.

²⁵ Calof, 26.

²⁶ Calof, 26.

²⁷ Edward W. Soja. *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996).

²⁸ Calof, 39.

far apart and no contact with the neighbours. Perhaps in this instance Hampsten is correct; we do know more about the furniture than about the connections or a map of the surrounding homesteading land claims. Influential frontier memoirs such as Nannie T. Alderson's *A Bride Goes West* and Elinore Pruitt Stewart's *Letters of a Woman Homesteader* do not picture isolated women alone on the homestead. Indeed, Calof's experiences follow somewhat this tradition. Though we are not told clearly in this text, there are actually neighbours within calling distance. When there is a problem in one shack, a scream brings other family members from their shacks less than a quarter of a mile away. But the isolation is nonetheless a real phenomenon: the neighbours are all Calofs. They set their shanties at the corner of the homesteads so that they could be in close proximity. They initially own livestock in common, and the adjacent lots allow them to dig one well for all of the families together.

This type of grouping is apparently not unusual, for different families describe similar situations in an oral history collection at the Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest. Norma Wilensky writes: "Mother told us of her neighbours getting together and with a team of horses moved her little shack so that she could be closer to the Minnengbergs, the Joe Weisbergs, and another family with adjoining land."²⁹

Each of these situations seems to be supportive, increasing the comfort level on the prairie. Apparently there are no fences, no boundaries, no real distances between the Calof families' farms. Not really the expanses of the prairie here, but something far more difficult: a small town made up entirely of Calofs. Similar to Geraldine Pratt's "valorization of outsider status,"³⁰ though Rachel marries into the clan, she maintains her distance after her wedding. Rachel's home allows her a separate space and identity from the other Calofs. Though she takes the patrimonial name, she will partly view her home as a "place of resistance" as

Gillian Rose writes of bell hooks' strategies.³¹ "Little Jerusalem," as it was apparently called,³² is a small village reimposed on a new setting. As she says

The home I had always so desperately sought still eluded me. The people, the overwhelming prairie, America itself, seemed strange and terrible. I had no place to turn. There were no other homes to be seen on the vast expanse of the great plain. Except for one family, the only people who lived within miles were the Calofs.³³

Even when the families are not contained by the extreme temperatures and storms of winter, they are separated from others by distances and Rachel Calof found herself "the only alien there."³⁴ Elizabeth Jameson suggests that the Calof story "violates the cozy nostalgia of pioneer families ... The seductive image they evoke of perpetual warmth, support and cooperation established a difficult standard for real families forced to mediate daily stresses, competing needs, and interpersonal accommodations."³⁵ Interestingly, contemporary diaspora studies focus on similar expressions of displacement, the elusive home, precisely Rachel Calof's objective over one hundred years ago. Rachel's pursuit and disappointment remind us of Janet Floyd's "understanding of home" to be "now often one that emphasizes the absence and the elusiveness of home as idea."³⁶

Despite her disappointment and alienation, Rachel Calof writes of both interiors and outdoor landscapes, and she relies on the transitions between them in order to maintain and develop her equilibrium. Transitional spaces provide routes for movement, growth and stability. *Rachel Calof's Story* oscillates from indoors to out in the "seamless" manner Peg Wherry describes in "At Home on the Range: Reactions of Pioneer Women

²⁹ Norma Wilensky, "Louis and Anna Reiter," (Unpublished memoir), n.d., n.p, located at the Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest.

³⁰ Geraldine Pratt, "Geographic Metaphors in Feminist Theory," *Making Worlds: Gender, Metaphor, Materiality*, Eds. Susan Hardy Aiken, Ann Brigham, Sallie A. Marston, Penny Waterstone (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1998), 14.

³¹ Gillian Rose, *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 155.

³² Lazar, 55.

³³ Calof, 29.

³⁴ Calof, 29.

³⁵ Elizabeth Jameson, "Rachel Bella Calof's Life as Collective History," *Rachel Calof's Life: Jewish Homesteader on the Northern Plains*, ed. J. Sanford Rikoon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995) 139.

³⁶ Floyd, 3.

to the Kansas Plains Landscape.” Wherry finds that commentary on the landscape in all of the Kansas pioneer women’s manuscripts that she examined is “seamlessly integrated with reports of other aspects of their lives.”³⁷ Wherry suggests that the integration of the outdoors is ubiquitous, a significantly different conclusion than Hampsten’s findings. Vera Norwood suggests that the interiors dominate in the analysis of frontier narratives: “In fact, there is not so much difference among Kolodny, [Lillian] Schlissel, and Hampsten, for each finds women’s basic languagescape comprised of the same metaphors: the interior circle of home and family.”³⁸

Calof’s story moves smoothly between indoors and out repeatedly, and if we are expecting a gendered view of domestic interiors and male-dominated exteriors, we are surprised at the approach the Calof book presents. Calof’s story does not neglect the outdoors, and, in fact, shows escape opportunities to the prairie from the cramped indoor spaces. The Calof text pushes beyond “seamless” and shows how transitional spaces are critical for avoiding the confinement of the crowded indoors. While the picture presented indoors is one of painful lack of privacy, those same shanty spaces become felicitous the moment that Rachel Calof’s in-laws move out every spring. It is the sharing of domestic space, rather than the containment, that causes the resentment of confinement.

In a 1995 interview in the *Seattle Times*, Jacob Calof said that his mother claimed there is “an inverse relationship of the land to personal space. The more wide open the prairie, the more people had to crowd together to keep from freezing to death.”³⁹ *Rachel Calof’s Story* records her first impressions of the North Dakota landscape in terms of desolation. The English version refers to the “long ride across the limitless prairie” after they arrived in Devils Lake by train, and the distance from the station to their farm as another twenty-

³⁷ Peg Wherry, “At Home on the Range: Reactions of Pioneer Women to the Kansas Plains Landscape,” *Kansas Quarterly* 18 (1986): 77.

³⁸ Vera Norwood, “Women’s Place: Continuity and Change in Response to Western Landscapes,” *Western Women: Their Land, Their Lives*, eds. Lillian Schlissel, Vicki L. Ruiz and Janice Monk, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988), 163.

³⁹ Sherry Stripling, “Rachel’s Prairie Tale,” *The Seattle Times*, 17 October 1995.

five miles “across the trackless prairie.”⁴⁰ Further in the narrative, she mentions the “grass desert,” giving birth in the “great wasteland,” the “overwhelming prairie,” and the “vast expanse of the great plain.”⁴¹ Yi-Fu Tuan, in *Space and Place*, however, warns that appreciating expansiveness is relative to cultural expectations. What is seen as certainly a formidable challenge to the pioneer, but not necessarily disadvantageous, could to a Russian immigrant such as Calof, be seen as a profoundly negative situation.⁴² In addition, the historical moment affects cultural acceptance, since before the plains became a prospect for potential settlement, they previously “provoked dread.” He says they “lacked definition compared with the reticulated spaces of the settled and forested East.”⁴³ Thus, while

Americans have learned to accept the open plains of the West as a symbol of opportunity and freedom, ... to the Russian peasants boundless space used to have the opposite meaning. It connoted despair rather than opportunity; it inhibited rather than encouraged action. It spoke of man’s paltriness as against the immensity and indifference of nature. Immensity oppressed.⁴⁴

Certainly to the immigrants in the late 1880s, homesteading seemed the promise of the future. However, Tuan warns that a negative component remained regarding this open expanse: “To be open and free is to be exposed and vulnerable. Open space has no trodden paths and signposts. It has no fixed pattern of established human meaning; it is like a blank sheet on which meaning may be imposed.”⁴⁵ The open expanse is not yet inscribed with meaningful markings, as is reflected in Rachel Calof’s description of being lost: “There were no landmarks or lights. To lose your way on the prairie was like being lost at sea.”⁴⁶ Rachel Calof found these unknown topographies frightening, yet compelling, in her search for autonomy.

Specifically, the Devils Lake area is part of the “Drift Prairie Plain,” a topography “within the

⁴⁰ Calof, 22-23.

⁴¹ Calof, 36, 62, 29, 29.

⁴² Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 55-56.

⁴³ Tuan, 57.

⁴⁴ Tuan, 55-56.

⁴⁵ Tuan, 54.

⁴⁶ Calof, 34.

limits of the latest ice invasion, and varies from gently undulating through rolling to hilly, the form being due almost entirely to the original disposition of the unmodified glacial drift upon a nearly level plain,” according to geographer Robert Thompson Young.⁴⁷ The open expanse changes from flatland to a more varied terrain. In this variety are unseen areas, invisible from a given point, and those are threatening even more than the visible uninterrupted expanse. Young describes the hidden elements of the landscape:

This prairie is otherwise a gently rolling drift plain cut by a few abnormally deep and well defined valleys... marked by many shallow, irregularly winding coulees and dotted by thousands of small lakes and marshy areas, occupying numerous sags and swales...⁴⁸

These “sags and swales” defy the impression of a flatland. Literary critic Hamida Bosmajian says “horizontally, the prairie is not really level. It has depths that envelop and depths from which the unexpected can emerge. Both disappearance and emergence tend to be sudden and connote a vaguely comprehended threat.”⁴⁹ The threats are real and the dangers unknown, but more frightening perhaps is that sense of seeing what appears to be flat, and not being able to comprehend the dips and divides that are part of the unfamiliar landscape.

The landscape the Calofs find seems to be totally devoid of landmarks, but I suspect this is only partially true. It would be a matter of years before the ridges and sloughs become familiar enough to be markers for their journeys; eventually this happens. Of course, simultaneously, building and planting actually changes the landscape. Trees mark boundaries between fields and farms and indicate the locations of farmhouses. Schools, roads and silos also become part of the changing landscape. Developing an awareness of their surroundings takes time, and meanwhile they experience frightening episodes of being lost, weather-induced difficulties in travel and mobility, and crisis conditions of paralysis.

⁴⁷ Young, 8.

⁴⁸ Young, 8.

⁴⁹ Hamida Bosmajian, “Vastness and Contraction of Space in *Little House on the Prairie*,” *Children’s Literature* 11 (1983): 55.

Furthermore, the outdoors is not static: the weather is part of this milieu. At the beginning of the text, the weather categorically controls their lives. Whether Rachel Calof is describing a summer storm that turned a shack upside down or the lengthy winter siege imposed by relentless cold and snow, her story focuses on utter vulnerability to the weather and ever-changing conditions. The day that Rachel arrives with her fiancé Abe they are met with the news that “the day before, a heavy wind, which was not unusual on these great open plains, had first torn the roof off Charlie’s [Abe’s older brother] shack and then had turned the structure upside down.”⁵⁰ Their world is at the mercy of the wind and their vulnerability is emphasised in the upside-down nature of the house, causing overcrowding in a relative’s shanty even during the summer. In a matter of moments the standard of living changes and the living accommodations shift dramatically.

The lack of control over the environment, the early vulnerability to the extremes in the weather, and the poverty result in crowding and determine the degree to which the Calof families need to share scarce resources. The first winter, five adults share the twelve by fourteen foot shack with chickens under the bed and a calf in the corner.⁵¹ The next winter, the indoor space is shared with a baby in a “hammock ... suspended from the ceiling over our bed.”⁵² Subsequent winters included more children and the “overcrowding promise[d] to be even more monstrous than in the previous winters.”⁵³ Eventually there is more interior space as they build a more substantial house, but for the most part, each winter brings some of the extended family members to share their space.

Nonetheless, Rachel Calof’s story is not primarily one of pain and deprivation. Precisely what stands out from the mesmerising details of the parallel extremes of expansiveness and containment is that she absolutely, doggedly and determinedly establishes escapes from these otherwise defeating phenomena. She does not sit passively in North Dakota, anymore than she did in the Ukraine, waiting for a better life. Perhaps this agency is what makes her story compelling. She describes in relentless detail those prairie environments, and she

⁵⁰ Calof, 25.

⁵¹ Calof, 39.

⁵² Calof, 58.

⁵³ Calof, 61.

lets us know exactly how many people are contained in the winter housing and whose feet are in her face when she is sleeping. In a variety of escapes, some more under her control than others, she pursues an individualistic path of self-fulfilment, sometimes unexpected and therefore all the more satisfying for the reader. Her “escapes” establish agency and involve courage and determination, but an additional factor is the degree to which she makes the transitions between known and unknown, familiar and unfamiliar space, in order to undertake these life-sustaining moves of her own. This very unfamiliarity is what Annette Kolodny sees as potential for creative appropriation of the landscape: “In the process of projecting resonant symbolic contents onto otherwise unknown terrains – a process I designate here as fantasy – women made those terrains their own. Fantasy ... allowed women to enact relational paradigms on strange and sometimes forbidding landscapes.”⁵⁴ Rachel Calof incorporates the fantasy and goes further: she “makes those terrains [her] own” by setting out on the unfamiliar prairies and establishes autonomy as she finds her way.

Success for Rachel seems to hinge upon both agency and escape: whether from the family situation in the Old World, the weather and limitations of the shanties, or taking on the prairie, on her own, or with her husband. She seems in many ways traditional in her role as a young Jewish immigrant, yet she forges what we might consider in contemporary terms suggested by K. Satchidanandan, a “third space, a hybrid location of antagonism, perpetual tension and pregnant chaos.”⁵⁵ In order for Rachel Calof to establish this success, transitional places, neither contained nor quite of the expanse, must be invented for in-between functions allowing her to move freely.

Windows always function as transitional spaces: in O. E. Rolvaag’s *Giants in the Earth*, Beret covers the windows “shutting out that vast outsidersness and containing one’s family,”⁵⁶ while in Laura Ingalls

Wilder’s books, Pa installs windows to “give him the connection with the expanse of the prairie.”⁵⁷ Hampsten considers women settlers’ “adversarial relations” between home and outdoors in terms of the absence of transitional spaces:

It appears to me that people even now who live in typical two-story frame houses in the Dakotas are continuing the essentially adversarial relationship to the out-of-doors that the first settlers found thrust upon them. Both the early temporary and later permanent housing arrangements include almost no gradations between outdoors and indoors.⁵⁸

She found that they “omit front porches and secluded garden spaces inviting easy rest or play”⁵⁹ which might have allowed for this necessary transition between the indoor and out. However, success for Rachel Calof ultimately was in that “dialectical movement between shelter and venture, attachment and freedom” that Tuan considered necessary in order to create a “calm centre of established values.”⁶⁰ Vera Norwood and Janice Monk suggest that environmental interactions differ between men and women, and among different groups of women. They declare “women, as well as men, seek personal transformation through interaction with the landscape; unlike men, they base such transformation on a sense of vulnerability in the approach.”⁶¹ The trajectory of the story begins with Rachel’s vulnerability in her environment “totally lacking in guiding landmarks”⁶² and ends with the point at which “travellers on the prairie oriented themselves by [the] beacon” at her home.⁶³

I consider the Calof English publication a hybrid: a collaborative combination of written text and oral history and I believe authorship can be shared as I think it should be in the Calof publication. Significant details of life on the homestead extend beyond those found in the manuscript, but without

⁵⁴ Kolodny, xii.

⁵⁵ Satchidanandan, K. “That Third Space: Interrogating the Diasporic Paradigm,” *Indian Literature* (45:3, 2001), 6.

⁵⁶ Raychel Haugrud Reiff, “Fighting the Trolls on the Dakota Plains: The Ecstasy and the Agony of Norwegian Immigrants’ Lives in O.E. Rolvaag’s *Giants in the Earth*, *The Immigrant Experience in North American Literature: Carving Out a Niche*, eds. Katherine B.

Payant and Toby Rose, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999), 37.

⁵⁷ Basmajian, 60.

⁵⁸ Hampsten, 38-39.

⁵⁹ Hampsten, 39.

⁶⁰ Tuan, 54.

⁶¹ Vera Norwood and Janice Monk, “Conclusion” *The Desert is No Lady*, eds. Vera Norwood and Janice Monk (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997) 234.

⁶² Calof, 63.

⁶³ Calof, 86.

attribution we must accept them as part of the collaborative process and not necessarily as Rachel's contribution. Standards of collaboration, particularly when involving transcription from oral histories to written works, continue to be debated. Translating, arranging and elaborating were all factors in producing the text as we have come to know it. Ideally, a new translation or a critical edition will be published incorporating Rachel's revisions and original texts. I suggest that Rachel Calof utilized the transitional spaces, perhaps a rocking chair on her front porch or a walk between the homes, familiarized herself with the local sags and swales, and ultimately created equilibrium between indoors and out, between motion and serenity, a position of valour in a family far removed from her birthplace.

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