Transgressing Boundaries to Metamorphose: *The Outlander* by Gil Adamson

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Abstract Gil Adamson's debut novel *The outlander* (2007) is set in 1903 and presents a nineteen-year-old Mrs. Mary Boulton, a widow by her own hand, who starts her rebirth with an act of violence. Adamson's heroine incites change and fashions her life as a process of transformation at the cost of transgressing visible as well as invisible boundaries to self-realisation. Fleeing from the external dangers, the widow confronts the overwhelming darkness of her own mind, which provides this remake of the western and a Canadian romance with a Gothic dimension. Haunted by the nightmares of the past, the enormity of her crime, the dead within her as well as the phantom of her former married Other, Mary Boulton learns survival skills, communes with nature, sides with other misfits she encounters on her way, and saves herself from hanging. Enlightened as well as strengthened by her traumatic experiences, pursued while pursuing, abandoned but herself abandoning, the widow stakes out a new territory with a promise of life inside her. She travels towards ultimate liberation, acceptance, and independence to the North, the romanticised place for renegotiating her identity and final erasure of constraints. In the peculiar detective story the widow's revengeful pursuers are joined by the reader who from the mosaic of fragments and memories reconstructs the story of the villainess' life. Evading easy categorisation and liberating herself from the gender stereotypes the murderess echoes the subversive heroines of such Canadian writers as Margaret Atwood and Aritha van Herk.

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1 Introduction: A Violent Rebirth

The heroine of Bharati Mukharjee's novel *Jasmine* remarks that "there are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself. We murder who we are so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams" (Mukherjee 1989, p. 29). Similarly, in Gil Adamson's awarded and critically acclaimed debut novel *The outlander* (2007), set in 1903, the process of metamorphosis starts with destruction. The novel presents nineteen-year-old Mrs. Mary Boulton, a widow by her own hand, who begins her self-creation with an act of violence.[1] The murder of her husband is a metaphorical annihilation of her imprisoned self and a gateway to rebirth. Adamson's heroine incites change and fashions her life as a process of transformation at the cost of transgressing visible as well as invisible boundaries to self-realisation. Thus, the widow escapes through the Canadian wilderness not only from her brothers-in–law, who seek revenge, but also from her previous identity. During the journey, functioning in the novel as a path towards redefinition, the heroine metamorphoses from a passive victim into an active, independent woman responsible for her own existence and orchestrating her future. Fleeing from external dangers, the widow confronts the overwhelming darkness of her own mind, which provides a Gothic dimension to the narrative. Haunted by the nightmares of the past, the enormity of her crime, the dead within her as well as the phantom of her former married Other, Mary Boulton, a contemporary incarnation of the pioneer woman, learns survival skills, communes with nature, sides with other misfits she encounters on her way, and saves herself from being hanged. Enlightened as well as strengthened by her traumatic experiences, pursued while pursuing, abandoned but herself abandoning, the widow stakes out a new territory with a promise of life inside her. She travels towards ultimate liberation, acceptance, and independence in the North, the romanticised place for renegotiating her identity and final erasure of constraints. In this unusual detective story the widow's revengeful pursuers are joined by the reader, who from a mosaic of fragments and memories must reconstruct the story of Mary's life. Evading easy categorisation and liberating herself from gender stereotypes, the murderess echoes the subversive heroines of such Canadian writers as Margaret Laurence, Margaret Atwood and Aritha van Herk.

[1] The novel has received several literary awards, such as the 2007 Drummer General's Award, the 2007 Amazon.ca/Books in Canada First Novel Award, the 2007 International Association of Crime Writers' Dashiell Hammamett Prize, and the 2007 ReLit Award. It was nominated for the 2009 Canada Reads Award, and was short-listed for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, Best Book, Canada and Caribbean and the Trillium Book. Additionally it was short-listed for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and long-listed for the International IMAC Dublin Literary Award.

2 The Canadian Western: Rewriting the Genre

One of the generic intertexts for *The outlander* is definitely the western. This genre probably came into existence in the fiction of James Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851), who combined tales of American settlement in the wilderness with the archetypal pattern of adventure stories (Cawelti 1976, pp. 192–259). The western does not have a set pattern of action. However, its recurring and essential ingredients are a challenge to the hero, an ultimate confrontation with an antagonist, the motif of revenge, as well as chase and pursuit. What characterises the genre and crucially defines it is the landscape, with its influence on the hero. Consequently, the western landscape provides space for the confrontation between civilisation and wilderness, life in the clearing and life in the wild, law and chaos, or constraints and total freedom/lawlessness. Historically, the western portrays a moment of harmony between the forces of civilisation and wilderness, while the hero is positioned between two contrasting ways of life. Cawelti (1976, p. 194) sees the most significant aspect of the western in its representation of the relationship between the hero and the clashing forces of civilisation and wilderness. The prototype of the western hero is Nathaniel Bumpo, the romanticised man of the wilderness from James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales. His extraordinariness is in the paradoxical combination of the civilised and the natural man, the skills which make him suitable for facing and taming the wild. Natty Bumpo was for Cooper the embodiment of the natural virtues that civilisation had lost. Furthermore, the western often included the conflict between domesticity and its values, such as marriage, family, social respectability, and security, and the ideal masculine way of life, which is liberated from constraints. The western emerged from setting and plot patterns through which the conflicts of society and individual autonomy, civilisation and unrestrained violence, could be settled.

In the 19th century American imagination the West was pregnant with romantic connotations offering ultimate freedom from the complex institutions, corruption and limitations associated with the East. In the further developments of the genre, the western setting functioned also as a place of moral regeneration due to the strong influence of nature. For Frederic Jackson Turner (1861–1932), the essential aspect of the West became social flexibility as well as the equality of opportunity, which led to the metamorphosis of men into free individuals. On the other hand, Zane Grey (1872–1939) and W.S. Hart (1864–1946) emphasised the West as a testing ground for a character, disclosing the truth about him. The outcome of the confrontation with wild nature and violent men is an affirmation of traditional American values—monogamous love, the settled family, the basic and stereotypical separation of gender roles, and the importance of religion. The classic western of the post-World War Two period presents a hero similar to Cooper's literary characters, as he is both involved in and separated from society. He often takes law into his own hands. Since the middle of the 1960s, the basic formula of the western has not been possible to be discerned, though such trends as emphasis on graphic violence and treating sex in a more open manner can be noticed.

In Canadian literature, due to the country's different course of literary development in the 19th century, a Canadian western genre did not exist, and there were no Canadian counterparts for the male-centred markers of the American frontier as traditionally represented in the genre (Davidson 1994, pp. 98, 99). The literary form was not particularly relevant to the Canadian experience. Therefore, the romance with its emphasis on action and adventure rather than the western with the focus on character and setting, was the predominant form of prose fiction about the Canadian West until the First World War (Ricou 1973, p. 14). The appropriation and deployment of American western iconography would have been, in Davidson's opinion, re-inscribing Canada's paracolonial status. According to Davidson, "Canada (…) stands to the United States in the world of global politics as 'woman' stands to 'man' in the plots of the conventional western—on the sidelines, occasionally counselling restraint or offering advice and moral support, but definitely not packing the big guns" (Davidson 1994, p. 99). Furthermore, the Canadian West was settled later and in a different fashion than the American West. It was not the settlers but the North West Mounted Police who were first in the Canadian West and worked to prevent any acts of violence resulting from the clashes between Indians and the pioneers. The American Wild West became, as Daniel Francis claims, the Mild West (2003, pp. 29–51). The Canadian Mountie, unlike the traditional hero of American westerns, did not resort to violence to solve a problem, but rather avoided violence while settling the conflict between civilisation and savagery (Harrison 1977, p. 162). Additionally, the Canadian settlers came to the West mostly by steam train, therefore such characteristic western determiners as wagon trains and Indian wars, cowboys and rustlers, shoot-outs and stampedes were out of place there. Due to the above differences, Canadian western writers have challenged the American western with a realistically portrayed Canadian West. What is more, because they have equalled the western with the American and the male, their re-writing of the genre has often resulted in a subversion and parody of the classic form.

Since the Canadian western was not a copy of the American one, the form itself was not perceived as exclusively male, either. Nevertheless, though some women, such as, for example, Nellie McClung (1873–1951), and later Martha Ostenso (1900–1963), Laura G. Salverson (1898–1970), Margaret Laurence (1926–1987), Gabrielle Roy (1909–1983) and Ethel Wilson (1888–1980), appropriated the western space in their novels, as Aritha van Herk claimed in her essay "Women writers and the prairie: spies in an indifferent landscape," first published in 1984, for most women writers the traditional image of the West was masculine. Therefore, in the West and the western, "men are men and life a stern test of man's real attributes. The fabric of this living, breathing landscape has been masculinized in art, descriptive passages of a land instinctively female perceived by a jaundiced

male eye" (van Herk 1992, p. 141). Women were traditionally, like in other masculine genres, to fit stereotypical roles.[2]

3 Gendered Space: The Pioneer Woman in the Wild

By placing her character in the Alberta wilderness and sending her on a journey through the Rocky Mountains Adamson definitely puts her heroine within the framework of the western, though the novel is very eclectic, including also elements of the gothic, the picaresque, and the historical novel (Bond 2009). Adamson's western, however, is feminist, and a pretext for challenging, testing and reshaping the protagonist's identity through violence and quest. It also examines the social context of women's lives at the turn of the 20th century. In a very romanticised setting, the healing power of nature and solitude as well as the survival test in the mountains result in Mary's moral regeneration and independence. The process is completed through still another final action—a journey to the North, even emptier and wilder than the mythical West, a symbolic equivalent of the West on Canadian land and in the Canadian imagination with the potential for freedom, autonomy, and independence.[3] Thus, experiencing not only the clash of wilderness and civilisation as it happens in the western, Adamson's heroine also faces her internal frontier, which makes her—to a certain extent—a contemporary embodiment of the pioneer woman. The pioneer woman as a character type was created by Catherine Parr Traill (1802–1899) in her non-fiction books *The backwoods of Canada* (1836), *The Canadian settler's guide* (1860) and her fiction *Canadian Crusoes* (1852) (Thompson 1991, pp. 112–157).[4] This character type can be adapted to various definitions of the frontier, and it refers especially to the frontier as a state of mind rather than a specific place. According to Thompson, the

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[2] Van Herk believes that this masculine view masquerades

> a world view for women and men, [and is] a selective realm where women are portrayed as mothers, saints or whores, but never people in their own right. Women as victims, cripples, betrayers, servants, objects, bitches. Female characters consistently maimed or killed for their rebellion. Or ignored for their acquiescence (1992, p. 83).

In her own novels, Aritha van Herk joined other Canadian women writers in appropriating the West and the western as women's space, and infiltrated the "kingdom of the male virgin" with her spies in the "indifferent landscape" (van Herk 1992, pp. 139–151) in such novels as *The tent peg* (1981), *No fixed address* (1986) and *Places far from Ellesmere* (1990).

[3] Compare, for example, Hulan 2002.

[4] Adamson's heroine is not the only example of the pioneer woman in Canadian literature, of course. In her study Thompson discusses several literary characters who adhere to the pattern, and also enumerates the 20th century writers (prior to the year 1991) who, according to her, use the character type in their fiction (Thompson 1991, p. 113). She gives only a few examples and does not mention the remaining books by van Herk which contain this type of heroine, such as *No fixed address* (1986), for example, or several heroines from Margaret Atwood's fiction, which, I would argue, are also modelled on the pioneer woman archetype.

characteristics of the pioneer woman are unchangeable even though the frontier environment alters. The pioneer woman, then, is courageous, resourceful, and pragmatic, accepts adverse circumstances with equanimity, and possesses strength to act decisively when she faces discomfort and danger. She should act promptly to improve her situation. Through her pioneering efforts, the woman discovers her intrinsic value. The pioneer woman reveals within herself a concealed or unexpressed potential for independence, a liberation from fear, restraint as well as social criticism, and becomes proud of accomplishing repulsive or difficult new tasks. Pursuing her new activities, the character discovers hidden internal strength and courage.

Though Adamson's heroine does not adhere ideally to the model, especially during her mostly solitary life in a cabin in the Alberta wilderness, she shares certain recognisable features with the literary prototype. Therefore, Mary's frontier landscape is "hostile, disorienting, and confusing" (Thompson 1991, p. 113), and not only external objects and physical perils constitute difficulties for her, but it is the heroine herself who creates internal problems. The story of Mary Boulton's life is disclosed in *The outlander* in little pieces of memories scattered non-chronologically throughout the novel. She had a solitary and miserable childhood in a house infused with illness and then mourning. Her father, after marrying a rich, though sickly, woman, treated his job, first as a pastor and then a lawyer, only as a pleasant distraction. Forever bedridden and ill, Mary's fading mother did not devote any time or attention to her daughter. What Mary remembers about her mother is only her death: "Everything is remembered by its moment of intensity. Dying was hers" (Adamson 2009, p. 96). For Mary's widowed father, life consisted of cessation and decay, death being the inevitable end of it. During his life as a widower he was permanently drunk, trying to erase his grief. As a young adult, when analysing her childhood and early youth Mary becomes certain that "she was invisible to both her parents. For her father, there had only ever been one her, and once she was gone, so was his connection to everything else" (Adamson 2009, p. 246). Furthermore, Mary's family deprived her of education, and throughout her life Mary tried with various ingenious tactics to hide her virtual illiteracy. The widow's grandmother believed that education was perilous for girls—damaging their brains and causing reproductive malfunction. Later, the widow realises that her tragic fate could be attributed not only to her father's despair and her grandmother's inability to deal with him and her, but also to her ignorance, to "knowing how little she herself knew" (Adamson 2009, p. 49).

Ignorant, innocent, and utterly obedient, the widow married the first candidate her family found suitable for her. Paraded at the marriage market as her grandmother's "project of the moment" (Adamson 2009, p. 137), Mary was to be prevented from becoming an old maid and ruining her life. The young girl, devoid of control over her own life, perceived herself as "a story, a tale still in the telling," curious about its end (Adamson 2009, p 137). Although she disliked being forced to attend parties, part of the scheme to find a husband, the elemental terror of spinsterhood that her grandmother had experienced soon spread to her. Still, at parties she remained mostly a recluse, trying to make her self invisible. It

was this potential for loneliness in Mary and her apparent desire for a solitary life that must have attracted John, her future husband and victim, to her during one such party:

> There was a girl who could stand the quiet and isolation, a girl who didn't need social life, didn't want it. How much better she would be in a lonely log cabin than would these happy playful girls who ran about the lawn holding hands (Adamson 2009, p. 138).

She became John's "best and only choice" since "like all gamblers, and to his peril, he trusted such moments of intuition" (Adamson 2009, p. 139). John Boulton presented himself to his future wife as a businessman and landowner whose father was a magistrate, and the courtship began. Still, nothing was known about the man, except for what he wanted to be known. Again, Mary was letting the current carry her away from her childhood and family. The marriage was to be for her a desired metamorphosis: "If she left, she might be free to change, to be something and someone else" (Adamson 2009, p. 139). She was attracted physically to her fiancée and felt unaccustomed passion, though doubts nagged her, as well. In her uncertainty, Mary was reassured that she would grow to love her husband, like other generations of women before her. Consequently, at the age of nineteen Mary was given away to a complete stranger who was thirty-five years old. Leaving her old home "drunk with the promise of transformation" (Adamson 2009, p. 140), she followed John into an unknown future.

John's promises of an affluent and comfortable life were not kept. Subsequently, Mary, a pampered girl, was offered a life in the solitude of a cabin, with an unfaithful and a gambling husband who was constantly displeased with her service as a housewife, and who resorted to sexual abuse. On the journey to the new home Mary wondered what her life in a "well-appointed house 'with hundreds of acres of land' would look like" (Adamson 2009, p. 127). John told her that in the new place "there's nothing but room" (Adamson 2009, p. 140). This turned out to be very true, because when they reached the destination, instead of a new home Mary saw only a small, square foundation. For two months the newlyweds lived in a tent in the trees, without a roof over their heads or privacy. Mary was totally unprepared and untrained for this type of existence:

> When she had found herself finally in the cabin with her new husband and she had unpacked her trousseau, the dresses with silk-covered buttons had lain in her hands like artifacts from another world. (…) It had been obvious what she must do. She had packed away her former self and begun sewing clothes, rough simple things to fit her new life (Adamson 2009, p. 35).

Furthermore, Mary had different expectations of marriage than John, who would disappear for weeks, and who treated her like a servant and his property. She was forced to acquire a new identity—that of the pioneer woman—and she slowly arrived at the truth about her husband.

At first the protagonist believed that her married life was not successful because there was something in her that caused her husband's dissatisfaction. Later, she noticed that John led a double life, the echoes of which started reaching her. The illuminations, "a process of seeing things again," came gradually, as "painful little

kink[s] in the flow that forced all thought to adjust to the truth. These were the seeds of her despair and madness" (Adamson 2009, p. 170). The accumulation of her husband's wrongdoings—unfaithfulness, gambling, sexual abuse, stealing her things to give them away to his lovers, neglecting her emotionally, and leaving her without assistance or support in the most dramatic moments of her life—led, in due course, to Mary's violent rebellion and the murder. On this path towards disaster, her initial happiness was fading to give place to bitterness:

> She'd been properly happy on her wedding day, gaily waving goodbye on the train, embracing her husband when he finally came to her in bed. Happy as expected. Then: the happy duped wife, the happy inept housekeeper left constantly alone, with winter roaming outside the cabin and the voices roaming inside her. The happy mother of a sick and dying baby (Adamson 2009, p. 210).

The traumatic event of her baby's death and her helplessness amid the wilderness, to which Mary ironically referred as a "small devastation" (Adamson 2009, p. 36), started the chain of tragic events. When her husband returned after a week to the cabin to check on his wife and the fading child, the baby had already died and his wife was in the midst of post-natal depression. What pushed Mary over the brink and triggered her rebellion was her humiliation when John's pregnant lover visited the cabin and when, after the child's burial, she was left alone again. Mary could remember only in flashes what happened later. There was a sudden realisation that she had been horribly impoverished: "Everything had been taken from her—her father, her birthplace, any money she had ever possessed, her engagement ring, her only child and now her husband," and this made her view her life in a new way: "The girl had looked around at nothing and had seen everything" (Adamson 2009, p. 217). A series of actions and decisions changed her life forever. First, she buried her wedding ring. Then she started sewing her widow clothes, waited for her husband, shot him, left him bleeding and dying on the floor of the cabin, resumed sewing and then began her run for a new life and a new identity.

4 The Flight Towards Self-Liberation

Mary's journey through the Alberta wilderness and the Rocky Mountains functions in *The outlander* as a metaphorical passage to the Conrad-like "heart of darkness"—into the widow's haunted mind and the horrors of her former life. It becomes also an important step towards self-liberation. It is in the mountains, "a monument in her path, promising freedom and camouflage" (Adamson 2009, p. 58), where the widow faces the internal frontier. This personal frontier is the result of the social context of women's lives at the turn of the century, and a result of Mary's mentality which has been shaped by her mourning father and her grandmother's inability to raise her. In her desire to overcome her internal constraints and her desire for freedom, she surprises the environment with her

previously unrecognised layers of power, both physical and spiritual, and her amazing yearning for personal autonomy. Throughout the novel she acts upon the frontier to bring about change. The process of self-understanding and metamorphosis starts in the mountains, when floods of memories cause Mary to ponder over her past. She disintegrates, and then puts her shattered self back together. The external landscape merges with the internal one:

> It was with grinding certainty that her mental lapses came. Sometimes accompanied by noises – a booming in her ears (…) but also voices, strange and distorted. Terrible things were imparted to her in non-words, in senseless howling, or the sound of a cricket chirruping. Or a clatter, like a spade thrust into a fan. She would press her hands over her ears – pointless. Because the noise came from within – press her palms there as if to keep the horrors from leaking out of her into the room. First the sounds, then the visions. And every time, she suffered a sense of fatedness, of punishment (…) Memories, gestures, her husband's indifferent voice. She suffered the echo of her baby's fussing, his shallow breathing. She snapped her hands round herself, rolled to her side, and closed her welling eyes. Wait, wait and they will pass, and perhaps nothing will rise in you (Adamson 2009, pp. 10, 157).

The wilderness offering her freedom, autonomy and adventure lets her realise that the greatest dangers come from the inside, and that the only darkness to be anxious about is of her own mind:

> The thing to be feared always came from within: exhaustion, unsound thoughts, ignorance, starvation. This was the locus of fear for her, a worm in the heart, where hope rotted in its dark whorls, where unwanted visions leaped – the darkness of her own mind. And yet here she was alone in the wilderness strangely content (Adamson 2009, p. 65).

Gradually, the widow starts seeing the world around her in a simpler and clearer way than before. Her former life and her previous identity as a submissive wife seem to her like a story about a different girl whom she has left behind. Looking back at her life, the widow becomes conscious of the fact that ignorance, humility, obedience, dependence and fear are her own private wilderness.

While fleeing from her former life and self, the widow meets several men, also outlanders, who contribute to her gradual metamorphosis and autonomy. One of them is the Ridgerunner—William Moreland. This chronic thief, just like the widow, is on the run from society and later also from himself. Resembling American transcendentalists, the man has spent 13 years away from society in solitary communion with nature, rejecting civilisation, suffering no loneliness, and enjoying absolute freedom in the mountains. The Ridgerunner teaches Mary some basic skills of survival in the wilderness and offers her the warmth, tenderness and sensuous pleasures which her egocentric husband refused to give her. The widow, still emotionally famished, quickly falls in love with the recluse and dreams of their mutual future. Then, however: "The shadow of something fretful passe[s] over his face and then [is] gone" (Adamson 2009, p. 105). Promising at first that he will never abandon the widow, William Moreland suddenly leaves, unable to sacrifice his freedom for the unexpected union.

After the Ridgerunner's disappearance Mary is unable to live on her own and looks for the care of another man. She starts living with the Reverend Mr. Angus Lorne Bonnycastle in the mining town of Frank, the only woman in a community of men. She becomes a pragmatic and an efficient housewife, a hunter and a barber at Charles MacEchern's trading post, and also advises the Reverend on alternative ways of appealing to the mining congregation. In her simple and quiet life with Bonny, devoid of any sexual subtext, she finds refuge from her stormy past and is slowly able to silence the raging emotions and haunting visions of her mind. She constantly remains in the process of healing from her disappointment with William Moreland: "How foolish it was to allow a man in, how terrible his power once you did" (Adamson 2009, p. 288). Surrounded by Bonny's security and care, she finds temporary happiness, though the enormity of her murder does not stop overwhelming her: "Like a woman rising from the damp sheets after a fever, the widow looked about her at a new life. All that was left now was her crime" (Adamson 2009, pp. 246, 247). Emotional independence from Bonny comes violently to the widow when the Reverend dies in a landslide. Modelled on the historical geological transformation that took place in the town of Frank in April 1903, the event described in Adamson's novel devastates the place and annihilates its numerous inhabitants. Mary helps in nursing the injured and dressing the dead. In despair again, "Twenty years old and she had already reached the border of her heart's endurance twice" (Adamson 2009, p. 318), she finally frees herself from the ghosts of the past and appreciates the miracle of her own survival amid the ruins.

It is at that moment when she becomes able to make conscious and independent decisions about her life. However, there awaits still another confrontation with her past when her brothers-in-law finally capture her, having recognised her in a picture in the coverage of the Frank landslide. Mary struggles against the brothers, for whom she is "an unfinished task" (Adamson 2009, p. 347). Due to their physical similarity to their murdered brother the widow feels as if she was facing her dead husband John once again:

> his jaw, his face, twinned, staring up at her in astonishment, and she, yearning to murder him again. His mouth falling open in surprise. A pink mist floating on the air, its dull taste on her lips, droplets on her hands, chin, forehead. His soundless open mouth as he fell. His mouth, saying, "You can have another," saying, "They come and go, like calves" (Adamson 2009, p. 332).[5]

Finally captured, tied up, furious but not afraid, Mary awaits a trial and possibly hanging for murder. With her survival beyond her control, the widow becomes a local spectacle, a murderess in Indian clothes, a curiosity. The desire for freedom does not die within her as she scrutinises the prison, "considering the objects in her

[5] The sentences ringing in the widow's ears were spoken by her husband after the death of her baby to cheer her up.

room as some kind of disassembled key to her escape" (Adamson 2009, p. 356). Realising she is pregnant with Ridgerunner's child and learning that one of the options given to her may be postponing the execution for the child to be born and then handing it over to its closest relatives, John's brothers, the widow discovers new strength and ingenuity. With a stolen knife, managing to dismantle the window bars through desperate efforts, she escapes once again, determined to keep the baby. Each step leads towards freedom: "She feels the rising exquisite gladness, a pride bursting inside her, for with any luck, her life was now her own, no one else's. The great fortune of it!" (Adamson 2009, p. 377). She sets the dead within her free, liberating herself from the haunting memories and guilt, to cling to the living and the promise of life within her. She discards her love for the Ridgerunner and with an air of certainty, determination, and newly-discovered inner power she sets out for the North to embrace its possibilities and test the potential for self-realisation.

5 Conclusion: From Dependence to Responsibility

Adamson's heroine of this Canadian feminist western novel with Gothic and picaresque undertones, like a literary prototype of the pioneer woman, does not remain idle in the face of hardships and difficulties. Although trained for a different life, in the Alberta wilderness she acquires survival skills that enable her to escape, after a period of submissiveness and mental breakdown, into the arms of the promising freedom of the Rocky Mountains, where she starts a process of healing and transformation. Her metamorphosis begins with an act of overwhelming violence. During her journey she confronts not only the physical but, more importantly, the inner frontier of her mind, and gradually tames her personal fears. Finding but always quickly losing the care, tenderness and security offered by men, the widow learns that she has to be responsible for her own existence and shape her own fate, rather than rely on others. Resembling other contemporary incarnations of literary pioneer women, such as the heroines of Margaret Lawrence, Aritha van Herk and Margaret Atwood, throughout the novel Mary Boulton sheds her former selves, discards self-imposed restraints, and grows into independence. The widow's never satisfied desire "refuses to believe that the world is finished and complete, (…) [It] stretches romanticism, defies history, transforms detail, perplexes tradition, welcomes freedom" (van Herk 1992, p. 84). This desire makes her transgress internal and external boundaries, and liberates her from the restricting labels of the western female character. Therefore, the disappearing murderess from Gil Adamson's *The outlander* can be measured by her striving for what seems inaccessible and her longing to explore human as well as the world's possibilities.

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