WOMAN WRITES HERSELF: EXPLORING IDENTITY
CONSTRUCTION IN LAURA INGALLS WILDER’S “PIONEER GIRL”

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A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

December 2010

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ABSTRACT

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For scholars of Theatre, Performance, and Women’s Studies, the problem of discovering and resurrecting voices of those peoples who have been silenced, oppressed, and erased from traditional histories looms large. In particular, the force of a patriarchal culture, which privileges the masculine public and oppresses the feminine private, has proven a difficult negotiation for those who wish to rectify the historical imbalance. In this dissertation, I use Hélène Cixous’s concept of feminine writing as a method to explore the possibilities and connections between feminine writing and the female body, and to discover to what extent women have agency to construct who they are through writing, using Laura Ingalls Wilder’s “Pioneer Girl” as my main primary source.

While many scholars have focused attention on Wilder’s published “Little House” series, I center my study on her lesser-known, handwritten, unpublished, autobiographical manuscript. In an attempt to re-conceptualize what kinds of writing contain value, I examine how “Pioneer Girl” and a few other articles and personal letters are viewed in tandem with their “finished” counterparts. My three main chapters revolve around Wilder’s feminine identity, as connected to the process of writing her life and sense of Self in “Pioneer Girl”: Chapter 2 explores the social context and values of pioneerism and the American First Wave feminist movement as intertwined with the creation of Wilder’s subjectivity; Chapter 3 tracks the construction of “Laura” within the body of the text; and Chapter 4 concentrates on the identity of the text itself, viewing the process of its writing and audience as a performance.

My work with Laura Ingalls Wilder and “Pioneer Girl” produces the author and text as exemplars of the notion that women who construct themselves outside of the strictures of
andocentric culture is both possible and valuable. In placing different permutations of her work on an equal plane, I piece together a new framework of Wilder’s “body” of/as work.
This dissertation is dedicated to my sister, Rachel, and to all the pioneering women who came before me. When I speak, it is your voices that echo back to me.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

If there’s one thing I hope my dissertation advocates, it’s that identity does not exist in a vacuum. I am certainly no exception, and have many people to thank for who I am and what I’ve been able to accomplish (so far). I’d like to thank my parents – Maxine and Bill, and Ray and Stacey – for always caring about my health and happiness, and for being nothing but supportive when I announced I wanted to get a PhD in theatre. I feel lucky to have four people that love me as much as you do. To my sister, Rachel: I’m so happy I get to have you in my life. I hope one day we get to be roommates again. And to the rest of my family, nobody has ever had more people show up for a graduation or a performance, and I’ve always been so thankful for that. So…Aunt Beth, Uncle Emy, Aunt Ilene, Uncle Coleman, Joanna, Abby, Jenny, Isaac, Bubby, Zayda, Grandmom, Grandpop and all the extended members…you mean more to me than I can ever say.

I’d like to thank the Revered Peter Donohue, for suggesting I apply to Bowling Green State University because he had gotten his doctorate in the Midwest. And to Michael Hollinger, Earl Bader, and Harriet Power, for encouraging me to continue my studies on the doctoral level. Here at Bowling Green, I honestly feel as though I not only have teachers, but mentors and friends as well. To Jonathan Chambers, thank you for your generosity, your instruction and your support. To the rest of my committee: Lesa Lockford, Ronald Shields, and Stephannie Gearhart; you have all gone out of your way for me over my time here, and I thank you for that. From all of you, I have learned not only how to be a better teacher and scholar, but also a better person. And to Sara Chambers, Scott Magelssen, Kimberly Coates, and Vikki Krane; thank you for your kindness, your teaching, and your yoga.
Thank you so much to the Western Historical Manuscript Collection in Columbia, Missouri; and to the Laura Ingalls Wilder Home Association in Mansfield, Missouri; for granting me the rights to transcribe and reproduce “Pioneer Girl” here. To all the people who granted me interviews everywhere from Kansas to Minnesota to Wisconsin to South Dakota: thank you so much for your generosity. Nobody that I asked to speak to turned me away, and everyone I spoke to not only gave me their time and attention and patience, but also showed me a kind, Midwestern spirit. Thank you to the people and organizations that run the Laura Ingalls Wilder homesites so that others may benefit and share in Wilder’s life.

To my friends – thank you for allowing me to call you that despite the fact that I haven’t stopped studying since I was about six years old. Thank you to Kate, who always asserted that I needed to go to graduate school, and to Amanda for encouraging me to do dinner theatre with her. And to C.R., who always checks up on me and has always been a good friend. Thank you to Erika, who doesn’t mind when I accidentally say that I love her, and to Gina for getting no sleep and coming to visit, and doing academic presentations that contain children’s dragon costumes. Thank you to my special Bowling Green Ladies: Hope, Vanessa, Season, and Heather. We have shared work, living space, sushi, karaoke, and salmon hats, and I love y’all for it. And thank you to my honorary Bowling Green Ladies: Mark, Lawrence, Rob, and Darin. To everyone else in the Department of Theatre and Film and in the Women’s Studies program: it’s been such a pleasure and an honor getting to know and work with you.

To Tim. It takes a special kind of person to spend their summer vacation at multiple Laura Ingalls Wilder homesites when they aren’t super familiar with her works and aren’t writing their dissertation on her. Thank you for the love and support. Thank you for giving me a home.
Thank you to my computer’s thesaurus for being there for me in my time of need, to *Star Trek: The Next Generation* for the entertainment when I needed a break, and to the city of New Orleans for the courage and perseverance and love.

And, of course, to Laura and her family, thank you for being.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Breakdown</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature Review, Theoretical Frameworks and Methods</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura Ingalls Wilder Biography</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major Differences Between “Pioneer Girl” and the “Little House” Series</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of “Pioneer Girl”</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER II. COMING TO WRITING: CONTEXTUALIZING THE AUTHOR</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pioneering Woman</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charting the Construction of Feminism: The First Wave</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER III. PUTTING HERSELF INTO THE TEXT: BECOMING “LAURA”</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Impressions: I / Laura</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masculine Identification: Towards the Tomboy</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminine Identification: Constructing the Young Lady</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transformations: Becoming Bess</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER IV. BY HER OWN MOVEMENT: THE PROCESS OF WRITING AND THE BIRTH OF THE READER</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Form and Function</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Work in Progress</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructing Subjectivity and Audience</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auto / Ethnography</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER V. CONCLUSION

Little Pageants on the Prairie

Summaries and Conclusions

WORKS CITED

APPENDIX B. HSRB INFORMED CONSENT
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Cover of First Notebook Containing “Pioneer Girl”</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>First Page of “Pioneer Girl”</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Mr. Brown Does Not Use the Word “Obey”</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Wilder Becomes a “Young Lady”</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Watching Pa Clean and Load His Gun</td>
<td>83-85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Wilder’s New Outfit</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Wilder’s Engagement</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Wilder Can Do the Driving Herself</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>“Not to be Used”</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>“Private”</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Note Attached to Cover of Notebook 2</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Added Story of the Book of Scotch Poems</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Pa is Written Over Father</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>A Drawing of Plum Creek</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Lake Pepin in Pepin, Wisconsin</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>“Stations” for Various Scenes</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Wilder-the-Narrator Addresses the Audience</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Young Audience Members Dress in “Prairie Garb”</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>A View of Plum Creek, Minnesota</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1: Introduction

My critical and theoretical analysis of Laura Ingalls Wilder began over twenty years ago, right after my eighth birthday. I had received Wilder’s work *On the Banks of Plum Creek* as a present from my Aunt, and, due to her career as an elementary school teacher and her superb present-giving track record, I took her recommendations of books quite seriously. Although an early and avid reader, I knew virtually nothing about Laura Ingalls Wilder or the “Little House” series. The handwritten inscription on the inside cover read: “Dear Nicole, This is the book where the family lives in a sod house. Hope you like it. Love, Aunt Ilene.” From this I deduced two things: 1) There were multiple books and they involved moving to different houses; and 2) Because of the general tone of familiarity about “the family,” it was clear that these were people that everybody else already knew about and that, therefore, I was not in “the know.” I did not enjoy not-knowing.

I was intrigued with the fact that the book jacket revealed that the author was the same person as the main character of the book: Laura Ingalls. I found stories that actually happened to be especially satisfying, and this was the first that I could remember that involved a girl from the nineteenth century that was my very own age. Yet, I wrestled with the information that this was not the first - nor even the second - book in the series, and that I had been given a work that was out of sequence.1 Should I go to the local library and check out both *Little House in the Big Woods* and *Little House on the Prairie* and read them first? Would it make a difference if I watched the heroine of the series, Laura, grow up out of order? Would my ability to understand

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1 The titles and publication dates of the “Little House” series are as follows: *Little House in the Big Woods* (1932); *Farmer Boy* (1933); *Little House on the Prairie* (1935); *On the Banks of Plum Creek* (1937); *By the Shores of Silver Lake* (1939); *The Long Winter* (1940); *Little Town on the Prairie* (1941); and *These Happy Golden Years* (1943). *Farmer Boy* is the only work that does not feature Laura and the Ingalls family; it details the childhood of Wilder’s husband, Almanzo Wilder.
and empathize with her decrease? Had my aunt actually made a mistake in thinking I had already engaged with the series? Or, was it possible that she meant for me to ignore chronological order. In the end, I trusted my Aunt Ilene knew the “Little House” series was new to me and trusted the implicit suggestion that I could and should satisfactorily experience Laura within a different framework of reading. Thus, I decided to begin my exploration of Laura Ingalls Wilder’s world with On the Banks of Plum Creek.

While I obviously had neither the proper vocabulary nor any conceptualization of critical and cultural theory, with that experience I nonetheless began, in a sense, to question the absolute authority of chronological order as well as the importance of following a traditional framework in my identification with Laura. In allowing myself to experience the “Little House” series outside of a traditional mode of organization and trusting that an alternative method would hold value, I set myself on a path that would lead to a more formalized awareness and subsequent questioning of how cultural paradigms and gender identities are constructed.

In my dissertation, I investigate the boundaries and processes of constructing feminine identity. The Laura Ingalls Wilder work “Pioneer Girl” (a handwritten, unpublished work estimated to have been written from late 1929 into early 1930) serves as the primary textual reference point from which I investigate different permutations of what it means to embody and perform the feminine and the connecting continua of private / public. The three central chapters of my study provide an analysis of Wilder’s identity preceding and during the writing of “Pioneer Girl”, the identity of “Laura” within the piece, and an analysis of the piece as a physical object. In this first chapter I introduce my subject, present my research questions, offer a literary review, and summarize the findings my study will produce. As readers may not be familiar with Laura Ingalls Wilder, the “Little House” series, and / or “Pioneer Girl,” I provide a
short biography of Wilder’s life, note the major differences between the series and “Pioneer Girl,” and provide an explanation of the logistics of my transcript, as well as describe how I use Wilder’s writing within further chapters. My transcription of “Pioneer Girl” is found in an appendix following the body of the dissertation.²

In Chapter Two, “Coming to Writing,” I consider Wilder’s identity prior to and during the writing of “Pioneer Girl” within a historical context. I explore some key events and values surrounding America’s nineteenth century pioneering movement, and consider Wilder’s treatment of traditional attitudes and mores of the time period. Moreover, Wilder’s birth year of 1867 is traditionally recognized as coinciding with the beginning dates of American First Wave feminism,³ which also traditionally culminates in 1920 with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution (a few years before “Pioneer Girl” was written). As Wilder was a noted local columnist for the *Missouri Ruralist* beginning in 1911 and appearing regularly through 1924, there are multiple examples of a growing dialogue which tracks her evolving stance regarding women’s suffrage, nation, and culture, as well as her development as a writer. I suggest that these writings serve as a performance of the relationship between Wilder and the changing cultural consciousness. As Susan Bennett asserts that “Cultural assumptions affect performances, and performances rewrite cultural assumptions” (2), I postulate the culture in which Wilder lived influenced how she performed her identity in everyday life and as a writer. I analyze how then-contemporary social movements and political activity may have influenced both the shape and style of Wilder’s writing, and the way she viewed herself as a performer within society.

² In this publication of my dissertation, Appendices “A” and “C” not included.
³ As detailed in Chapter Two, the beginning year associated the First Wave movement, 1848, is taken from the date of the Seneca Falls Convention, during which time the Declaration of Sentiments was constructed.
The key research questions in Chapter Two include: How was Wilder’s identity influenced by the political, social, and cultural practices of her time period? In what ways does she reflect and refract the values and practices of first wave feminism? What themes and tropes does her writing within the *Missouri Ruralist* exhibit that factor into the construction of “Pioneer Girl”? And what were the conditions that pre-figured the production of “Pioneer Girl”?

Chapter Three, “Putting Herself Into the Text,” investigates Wilder’s treatment of gendered identity performance within the text of “Pioneer Girl.” Beginning with Simone de Beauvoir’s germinal statement that “one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman” (1097), I work from the standpoint that femininity and masculinity consist of learned behaviors sanctioned by the society in which they function. This chapter surveys Wilder’s descriptions of gender identity as played out in physical activities, clothing styles, social decorum, and personal reflections and observations. In particular, I focus on her identification (and dis-identification) with both her mother and her father, her courtship with her husband, and her various other relationships with siblings, friends, etc. As Wilder both chafes and subscribes to the rigid divisions between the lives of men and women, there is a conscious construction of self as the author re-lives her formative years. While Wilder does not utilize the word “feminist” or talk specifically of gendered oppression, she, nonetheless, presents a more candid and personal approach to her life than that which is presented in the published “Little House” series. In using “Pioneer Girl” as the primary subject of my analysis, I present an expanded version of who “Laura” is, and her process of becoming.

Some of the key research questions from Chapter Three are: How is “Laura’s” conception of femininity and masculinity formed, and how does it change over time? What people and events are key in shaping Wilder’s identity? To what extent is Wilder aware of the
performative nature of identity? What aspects of traditional gendered identity are difficult to conform to, and why? And what is revealed about Wilder’s identity within “Pioneer Girl” that is not found within the “Little House” series?

Chapter 4 “By Her Own Movement,” stems from the widespread belief that “Pioneer Girl” functions solely as a draft/outline for the forthcoming published series, and its inherent lesser importance as such. Conversely, I propose a re-valuing of the work because of its “unfinished” nature; instead of viewing (what some may consider) substandard plotlines and sloppy handwriting, there is the possibility of discerning Wilder’s thought process and values. In addition to numerous anecdotes and details within “Pioneer Girl” that are not present in the published series, there are many instances where writing is crossed out, written over, and noted as “private” or “not to be used.” These “notations”/deliberate editing choices open up possibilities for understanding Wilder’s work, her life, and contemplating the nature of her implied audience/s. Furthermore, in considering these moments as both literal and figurative performances of what it means to construct one’s life narrative, I offer a speculative inquiry into the way the archival object can perform and create meaning. Because “Pioneer Girl” presents itself as more ambiguous in intention and content than the “published series,” there are greater opportunities to make it one’s own.

The primary research questions for Chapter Four are: What patterns of development exist in Wilder’s process of drafting? What new knowledge can be derived from the areas where Wilder re-visits her script? Who was the original audience of “Pioneer Girl”? How can this “unfinished” piece be re-valued alongside the published series? And in what ways can “Pioneer Girl” be viewed as both an archival object and an ongoing, ephemeral performance?
In the fifth and concluding chapter, I evaluate “Pioneer Girl’s” shift from private, personal narrative, to a public object that continues to be re-written and re-performed by readers/audiences of Wilder’s work. I survey the identity of “Laura” within various pageant plays, and note the similarities in trajectory to those within “Pioneer Girl.” I provide a succinct summation of the importance of constructing gendered identity through culture, behavior, text, and performance. Finally, I produce a conclusion to my study, review its key points, track my own process of learning, and suggest further permutations of my research for future scholars of Laura Ingalls Wilder.

Questions that guide my conclusion are: How is Wilder’s identity both public and private? In what ways have others incorporated Wilder’s identity into their own? How do performances of pageant plays interpret and perform Wilder’s identity? What have I learned throughout the process of reading and writing this dissertation? And, what are some future avenues for continued scholarly inquiry?

Taken together, then, with this dissertation I accomplish two major tasks:

1) I explore the performance of identity in Laura Ingalls Wilder’s “Pioneer Girl”; and

2) I investigate the notion of reading/writing as a construction of the feminine corporeal self.

Additionally, I produce a transcript here for the first time of “Pioneer Girl,” a handwritten, unpublished work. In pursuing my objectives, I will be contributing significantly to the scholarly community. I will be transcribing an unpublished work that offers insight into the writing and construction of the persona of Laura Ingalls Wilder, which allows for a fuller understanding of the author and her work. In addition, it also provides further options for the reader to engage in the post-modern and feminist concern of privileging process alongside and

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4 Shortly after its completion, Wilder sent “Pioneer Girl” to her daughter, writer and editor Rose Wilder Lane, who simultaneously transcribed and edited the manuscript. To my knowledge, however, no other transcription exists of the document in its original form, except my own.
over product, as this work is essentially an early draft of her eight novels (or, to view it in a slightly different way, these novels are elongated drafts of this early memoir/novel).

**Literature Review, Theoretical Frameworks and Methods**

Because my dissertation revolves around the life and writings of Laura Ingalls Wilder, it is necessary to familiarize myself not only with Wilder’s work, but also those scholarly writings that interrogate those works. Interestingly, while there are a number of biographies which concentrate on Wilder and her daughter, Rose Wilder Lane, few are focused on theorization or contain a level of documented research that is easy to track in terms of dissertation source material. Chief among these are the publications of William Anderson, a high school teacher and historian, who has worked in conjunction with the Laura Ingalls Wilder Home and Museum in Mansfield, Missouri, to produce a dozen or so books and booklets about Wilder, her work, and the people close to her. Many of Anderson’s works are fifty pages or less, written for a general or juvenile audience, and structured around one facet or section of Wilder’s life, such as *The Walnut Grove Story of Laura Ingalls Wilder*, which focuses on the Ingalls family while in Minnesota. What makes Anderson’s work valuable to my study is his inclusion of letters and artifacts from the Wilder museum. For example, in *Laura Ingalls Wilder: The Iowa Story* he provides large, verbatim sections from the diaries of Wilder’s sister, Grace Pearl (Ingalls) Dow, which I have been unable to locate elsewhere. As my work centers on the process of Wilder’s writing and the differences between historical “fact” and her novels, the impressions and words of others in her family are an invaluable asset held against her own. Then, too, as Anderson is considered a chief Wilder biographer, his multiple booklets are useful in my examination of the audiencing and consumption of Wilder’s works.
A more extensive biographical review of Wilder and a comparison to the timeline of events in her books can be found in Ralph Richard Dykstra’s dissertation, *The Autobiographical Aspects of Laura Ingalls Wilder’s ‘Little House’ Books*. Dykstra’s purpose is to “identify and analyze the autobiographical elements of the Laura Ingalls Wilder ‘Little House’ saga and (1) identify those events in the author’s life which may have influenced her writing and (2) the way in which that life had been interpreted in the saga” (abstract). Limiting his study to the twelve years spanning the eight novels, Dykstra organizes his dissertation chronologically by book and in the following categories: locations, events, people, experiences, and attitudes. Written in 1980 before the widespread focus on critical and cultural theory, Dykstra’s work compares and contrasts historical “fact” with the content of Wilder’s books. As my dissertation explores the ways in which Wilder “alters” the facts of her life within “Pioneer Girl” and the “Little House” series, Dykstra’s dissertation is extremely helpful as a back-up source in confirming and verifying where the proof many of the accepted “historical facts” regarding Laura Ingalls Wilder derive.

John E. Miller combines biographical material with scholarly investigation in his insightful book *Becoming Laura Ingalls Wilder: The Woman Behind the Legend*. Miller focuses on Wilder’s life after the time period described in the novels - her life in Missouri from 1894 through her death in 1957. Beginning with the question, “How did this seemingly ordinary woman come to produce such extraordinary work” (3-4), Miller seeks to identify those conditions and qualities which led the adult Wilder to the writing career that made her famous. While those such as Dykstra are interested in the connection between the novels and historical “fact,” Miller privileges the construction of the author over the construction of the writing. He writes, “I have written a biography describing and explaining the lived life, and I leave for others
the task of showing wherein the fictional character she created may have departed from her actual experiences” (11). The biggest strength in Miller’s work is his description of Wilder’s relationship with her daughter, Rose Wilder Lane. Lane was a prolific author and epitomized the “New Woman” of the early twentieth century; it was she who encouraged Wilder toward further avenues for her writing. While Miller does not offer a definitive opinion on the (often debated) extent to which Lane may have authored some or all of the “Little House” books, he does provide a rich portrait of the mother / daughter and writer / writer relationship of the two based on letters and the private diaries of Lane, which is invaluable in my quest to understand and provide context for the writing of “Pioneer Girl.” As such, my study is, in part, an answer to Miller’s charge of examining the relationship between Wilder’s “lived” life and her life as it is portrayed in her books. While the differences between the two have led her published works to be classified as “fiction,” I seek to uncover Wilder’s possible motivations for her changes, as well as the qualifying factors that lead to her claim that both versions are “true.”

Finally, Anne Romines’s 1997 work, Constructing the Little House: Gender, Culture and Laura Ingalls Wilder, is the first full length study (that I am aware of) of author Laura Ingalls Wilder’s semi-autobiographical “Little House” books examined against a contemporary backdrop of literary and cultural theory. Arranged both chronologically (Romines begins with the earliest book, Little House in the Big Woods and ends with the last, The First Four Years) and topically (the chapters are titled, for example, “Indians in the House: A Narrative of Acculturation” and “Getting and Spending: Materialism and the Little House”), Romines’s writing style and organization performs the categories she explores: the construction of a female narrative alongside traditional male discourse and culture. Beginning with a personal narrative in which the author describes a childhood meeting with Wilder, Romines weaves her own voice
with those of the “actual” Laura Ingalls Wilder and Rose Wilder Lane, and their painstaking process of crafting the Little House series.

While Romines approaches this project with the conscious and skilled voice of an academic influenced by Feminism, New Historicism and Post Structuralism, she posits that the original authors were also concerned with gender politics. She notes, “For Wilder and Lane, as for me and many other readers, these are gendered questions about girls’ and women’s agency and about how agency can be created and enacted by speaking and writing” (10). In Romines’s work, text, letters between Wilder and Lane, primary source documents, personal artifacts, and cultural theories all coalesce to paint a rich portrait of the construction of a female and feminine life, both personal and political, public and private. While Romines focuses on the nine novels/memoirs, I explore the process of their making, particularly that of the personae of Laura. Romines notes but does fully examine the ways in which Wilder and Lane consciously construct the “fictional” Laura, and the writing of identity that the reader initiates when she encounters the text of written word and object. In my study, I investigate the porous boundary between Wilder-the-Writer and Laura-the-Character, and work to construct the relationship between author, text, and feminine identity.

In addition to works that have looked at Wilder, also important to my thinking are studies that discuss the intersection of performance and feminism, particularly when discussing feminine language and behavior. The idea of a feminine language – words, sentence structure, and style – is one that is based not in biology but sociology and culture. Feminine language refers to exploring the construction and performance of femininity. As such, the following reviewed works are those concerned with exploring feminism and language, the construction and
performance of gender, feminism and theatre, and feminism, performances, and the role of the feminist spectator.

As noted in the introduction to Deborah Cameron’s collection, *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader*, gendered assumptions have constructed language, writing, the spoken word, and the agency to conduct these endeavors. As such, literary texts cannot be read in isolation; they should be examined for how they both reveal and subvert patriarchal society. The introduction and first section are particularly suited to my research. Cameron foregrounds these essays with her piece, “Why is language a feminist issue?” Here, she traces a cultural and gendered history of language and writing practices and links them to learned rules of public and private social discourse. Cameron argues:

> The silence of women is above all an absence of female voices and concerns from high culture. If we look at a society’s most prestigious linguistic registers – religious ceremonial, political rhetoric, legal discourse, science, poetry - we find women’s voices for the most part silent – or rather silenced.” (4)

She then outlines numerous, at times contradictory, methods to combat the notion of feminine silence in language, stressing the importance of openness and possibility. To support her argument, she cites both de Beauvoir’s notion that “masculine” behaviors such as rationality and engagement in social, public discourse are not inherently gendered, but rather claimed by males, and the notion that some feminists find it essential to embody gendered difference through language and writing.

Also of particular use to my thinking is Virginia Woof’s well-known essay, “Women in Fiction,” where she asserts that the female voice has been locked away in the private sphere and that it has simply been ignored by the public. Writing in the same year that Wilder wrote
“Pioneer Girl,” Woolf astutely asks, “Why, we ask at once, was there no continuous writing done by women before the eighteenth century” (33)? Woolf then points to literal solutions for bringing women’s language and stories toward a public forum, which contests the notion that only privacy equals feminine, and that it is possible for personal narratives to combat patriarchy. As both de Beauvoir and Woolf wrote during Wilder’s lifetime, they help to establish a contextual framework for feminist practices and thought during the time period. While Wilder never claimed the label of “feminist” for herself, these two authors provide me with a backdrop for exploring the ways Wilder’s behavior and writing may, nonetheless, subvert the oppressive conditions of the patriarchal culture she lives in.

In the collection *Voices Made Flesh: Performing Women’s Autobiography*, co-editor M. Heather Carver notes that, in defiance of the forced relegation of the female to the private spheres of life, women are beginning to make their lives known and their stories political through the act of solo performance. In her introductory essay “Risky Business: Exploring Women’s Autobiography and Performance,” she tells us “Autobiographical performance is inherently fraught with the complexities of the relationship between history and representation – between what happened and what is remembered and performed … For women to even begin to write the autobiographical ‘I’ acknowledges that we can be subjects of our own stories” (15). As she tells her story, she simultaneously makes her body and self and imprints herself on the annals of history/herstory, proclaiming the lopsidedness of a gendered recorded history that ignores half the population. As other women recognize themselves in the female solo performance artist, they, too, will be able to take further steps toward ownership of a female body and sense of self.

*Voices* is comprised of various essays exploring how the path of the female voice is being forged in unique, personal directions. While my dissertation does not examine traditional forms
of solo performance, those essays that discuss the construction of the feminine voice, as well as the process that occurs while doing an ethnography of another female artist, are useful to me. Particularly suited to my work is Elyse Lamm Pineau’s assertion that such a performance constructs an evolving relationship and new identity within the writer and subject. As the title of her essay “Intimate Partners: A Critical Biography of Performing Anaïs” announces, there exists a deep, personal relationship between Pineau and Anaïs Nin. Although Pineau does not know Nin in the bodily sense as “their” work began after the death of Nin, something deeply intimate happens when the two converge on stage in what Schechner calls “not me” and “not not me.” Pineau tells us, “Generative autobiographical performance begets a generational line whose heritage is mingled from all the bodies of memory we have touched and incorporated into our own” (44). The very act of female bodily incorporation – a push and pull of identity exploration – echoes the rhythmic female sexuality cycle, or fertility and birth. Indeed, Pineau compares the performance between the two as a kind of child or new body that is formed. Again, while I am not producing a theatrical solo performance, Pineau’s identification with Nin is a negotiation I also engage in with Wilder. Using Pineau’s example as a guide allows me to explore and identify my performance of both Wilder and myself.

Another source that helps my outline feminist discourse within the framework of performance/audience relations is Jill Dolan’s *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*. Dolan’s important work begins with a survey of feminism, which includes a “critique of prevailing social conditions that formulate women’s position as outside of dominant male discourse” (3). Owing that acknowledging one’s positionality brings about the roots of change, Dolan outlines three major branches of feminist thought prominent from the 1980s onward: liberal feminism, radical feminism, and materialist feminism. I believe that recognizing the cultural flow of feminist
thought, studying the differing viewpoints that construct them, and acknowledging the value of my own positionality will be indispensable to my study as I look at the various ways of interpreting Wilder’s work through a feminist lens and its consumption on both a private and public level.

Finally, as I am attempting to reconstruct (at least in part) the life experiences of Laura Ingalls Wilder, I wish to acknowledge the role and importance of history as a performance. In my dissertation, I show how the interaction with materials of the past – whether it be cultural history, personal memory, or the re-reading of a text– is symbiotic: each feeds off of the other to create a new life, an ephemeral moment where past and present, personal and political, masculine and feminine reflect, refract, and, ultimately, open up. As such it is important to acknowledge my own positionality in reading these contexts and performances.

Dennis Kennedy’s essay, “Confessions of an Encyclopedist,” centers on the author’s experience editing The Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance, published by Oxford University Press in 2003. In recounting the time consuming task of compilation and organization, Kennedy tracks the construction of knowledge both on the page and in the mind of the reader, calling attention to the varying forces that shape traditionally viewed history and to the agency of the reader/spectator. He quotes Marco de Marinis, who theorizes: “on close inspection one is not producing theatre history but only a history of theatrical documents” (33). Kennedy argues that many of the documents, which are traditionally viewed as encompassing the whole of theatre history, need to be reexamined as representing only that of a written history. Thus, he indicates that alternative histories exist and should be studied and valued. Particularly fascinating is Kennedy’s notion that the reader participates in meaning making in the very way she chooses, utilizes, and analyzes encyclopedic cross references. He notes, “the adventure
represents a more active intellectual participation on your part, not only because you have been given the freedom to fill in the inevitable gaps but also because you are almost forced to construct a history of your own in so doing” (34). This focus on the act of writing, arrangement of text, and reader-response reaction is fundamental to my interests in alternative ways of viewing and making history and in my study of what incorporates female and feminist writing.

In this dissertation, I primarily employ the tenants of performance and feminist theories. Both of these areas will be guided by the framework of feminine writing, with a particular focus on the continuum of private / feminine and public / masculine. Broadly speaking, I am interested in the intersections of gender and performance. Throughout my dissertation, I explicate basic feminist tropes such as: unpacking the notion of boundaries, privileging the idea of experience, valuing reflexivity, paying attention to power imbalance, and uncovering and highlighting hegemonic assumptions within gender and class. While Hélène Cixous’s notion of feminine writing provides a broad framework for my dissertation chapters, Judith Butler, a scholar whose work is heralded in both Gender and Performance theory, serves as an exemplar of the basic tropes I wish to expound on in my research.

For scholars of Theatre, Performance, and Women’s Studies, the problem of discovering and resurrecting voices of those peoples who have been silenced, oppressed, and erased from traditional histories looms large. In particular, the force of a patriarchal culture, which privileges the masculine public and oppresses the feminine private, has proven a difficult negotiation for those who wish to rectify the historical imbalance. In her essay “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Hélène Cixous outlines and critiques the structure of a patriarchal society in which the female and feminine voice has not only been silenced, but dangerously repressed. As such, Cixous speaks directly to women in a quest to emancipate themselves from phallocentrism.
Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement. (2039)

She calls for the development of a distinct female, personal voice. This voice is achieved through what she calls “feminine writing,” or l’écriture feminine.

Borrowing from Lacan’s paradigms regarding gender and language, Cixous notes that masculinity and the phallus have traditionally been at the center of symbolic order and structure, while women and the feminine are relegated to the marginalized and the fantastical realms. It is impossible for women to write and tell their stories because they are physically and metaphorically unequipped to do so. Whereas men have been given the pen as the phallus and the hierarchal subjunctive, women are pushed away first from the pregnant maternal body and then their own bodily sexuality as they are regarded as passive receptors of the phallus. Thus, they are unable to participate within a patriarchal system that negates their existence.

With feminine writing, Cixous aims to deconstruct power systems that privilege the pen in relation to the penis. It is important to note that for Cixous the terms “woman” and “feminine” are to be taken both literally and metaphorically. On a literal plane, she asserts that one way to offset the dominant plethora of masculine texts is for women to take hold of a writing implement and put it to use. Then, too, (and speaking metaphorically) she urges women to take control of their sexuality, and by extension, their sense of self, by acknowledging that their bodies and their pleasure comes not from the passive relationship to the phallus but can be found within the feminine body. Instead of a phallus, she tells women to write with the “white ink” of their breast milk, their feminine body and their nourishment (2045). On a literal level, she is
calling for women to reclaim their bodies, their sexuality, and the telling of their lives.

Conversely, Cixous creates a paradox as she introduces feminine writing to be both intrinsically related to a material body that includes breasts and a vagina, and also allows for the idea of female and feminine to be a signifier for that which is not fixed in meaning, and represents fluidity and movement. In this sense, it is possible for a male to participate in feminine writing. She tells us, “an oblique consideration will be found here of man; its up to him to say where his masculinity and femininity are at: this will concern us once men have opened their eyes and themselves clearly” (2041). Thus, the performance of gender can be related to actions and concepts disconnected from the corporeal self.

It is the very incongruity of insisting on a physical female body while noting that feminine is also a metaphor/signifier, available to men, that is the heart of Cixous’s argument. The refusal to seamlessly reconcile the two concepts is a stand against essentialization and the quest for fixed meaning as privileged in phallocentrism. She is careful to note that “woman” is not a reductive identity and instead allows for growth and movement within the “universal woman subject” (2041). Instead of essentializing, Cixous links women by “what they have in common” (2040), thus suggesting there will always be parts of the female/feminine that cannot be pinned down and require room for the processes of birth and rebirth, revision and reconstruction. As such, Cixous does not offer a stringent framework of what feminine writing should look like, but instead emphasizes a kind of poetic discourse that plays with language, that allows for writing to exist as a body and a construction of self, and invites different permutations of both authorship and readership.

lay claim in the irreducible materiality of the body and a fixed binary of innate sexed behavior found thereafter. She urges us to look beyond simple biology toward social forces that enact within and without the body to construct gender. Butler likens gender to Performance Studies’ notion of “repeated” behavior informing who we are; thus, the nucleus of what constitutes gender does not actually exist, but is rather a set of malleable, learned, cultural norms. She radically asserts that “the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis” (1099). Even at the chromosomal level, description is still a repeated act as its discourse is based in cultural signification. Butler proposes that we alter our traditionally limiting measurements for enacting gender and suggests we view it instead as a continuum of ongoing expressions that are performed as the body. She views descriptors such as “natural” as dangerous, and asks us to ultimately consider gender as a series of daily performances as something “put on” in order that we may “expand the cultural field bodily through subversive performances of various kinds” (1105). Butler’s argument for the daily, social constitution of gender is essential to my exploration of the possibility of a female constructing her own identity and culture through the act of creating a feminine personal narrative, and the ensuing meaning-making process the reader goes through when she encounters the work. In my dissertation, I utilize Butler’s notion that gender is a set of behaviors, which are constituted through societal practices. I seek to uncover what Butler terms the behavioral “artifice” that creates the slippery space between femininity and masculinity within Wilder’s life and identity as a writer, within the character of “Laura” within the text, and within “Pioneer Girl” as a physical object. Similarly, I am interested in embodiment and the different forms by which identity can be constituted
through writing. Guided by Cixous’s principle that feminine corporeality can take multiple forms, I believe “Pioneer Girl” has the capacity for performing identity.

This dissertation primarily utilizes the methodology of feminist textual analysis. Using the unpublished Laura Ingalls Wilder work “Pioneer Girl” as a primary source, I analyze different permutations of feminine identity. Drawing on the notion of gender as understood through social behaviors, I explore the intersections of feminism and performance. In each of the three main chapters (Coming to Writing, Putting Herself Into the Text, By Her Own Movement), I investigate forms of embodiment enacted by the author, writing, and text of “Pioneer Girl.” I track the difference between the draft and their published counterparts, including historical and anecdotal information, changes in subjective voice, physical differences between the handwritten and the published, and the overall shaping of narrative. I concentrate on the relationship between Wilder’s works with historical “fact,” as well as the discourse Wilder creates in the various drafts surrounding the persona of “Laura.” I posit that feminine identity is constituted over time through the life experience of an author, constructed through personal narratives, and performed through engagement with written artifacts.

Conclusions

In my dissertation, I examine the production of female identity within Laura Ingalls Wilder’s work, “Pioneer Girl.” The multitude of connections between author, subject, and audience allow for a thorough examination of a work that has yet to be the focal point of scholarly investigation. With this study, I challenge the notion that gender is innate and fixed, and that corporeal expression can only be found within the human body. As Wilder is intricately involved in “Pioneer Girl,” as its author, subject, and – in a sense – creator of text as object, she
represents an opportunity to rectify the patriarchal notion that women are the passive receptors of their lives and absent from the production of historical objects. How might writing alter conceptions of the boundaries of embodiment and femininity? How is identity constituted, and in what ways can it be performed? In presenting Laura Ingalls Wilder and her work, “Pioneer Girl,” I piece together a new framework of Wilder’s “body” of / as work, and introduce a new mode of performing and experiencing the feminine.

Laura Ingalls Wilder Biography:

Laura Ingalls Wilder is known for her life story: both the extraordinary circumstances of her upbringing as detailed in the “Little House” series, as well as her motivations to write her first book at the age of sixty-five years. Because my dissertation is steeped not only in her lived experience, but also is steeped in the various incantations throughout her multiple writings, I wish to present a brief biography to be used as a baseline, particularly for those readers who may not be familiar with her life.

Laura Ingalls Wilder was an American pioneer and writer who lived during an auspicious time in American history. She was born less than two years after the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln, and spent her childhood travelling in covered wagons led by horses; by the time of her death, World War II was over, she owned an automobile and had once flown in an airplane.

Wilder was born Laura Elizabeth Ingalls on February 7, 1867, in a log cabin in the Big Woods of Wisconsin just outside of Pepin, to Charles Philip Ingalls and Caroline Quiner Lake Ingalls. Sister Mary Amelia was two years older than Wilder, and three other siblings eventually followed: Caroline Celestia (Carrie) was born in Kansas in 1870, Charles Frederick (Freddie)
was born in Minnesota in 1875 and died nine months later of unknown causes, and Grace Pearl was born in Iowa in 1877. At the time of Wilder’s birth, the Ingalls family lived in the woods with no close neighbors, relying on their gardening and Charles’s hunting for much of their sustenance, and purchasing supplies from the town of Pepin. During 1869, the family left Wisconsin and travelled by covered wagon briefly to Missouri before settling in Montgomery County, Kansas, in 1870. While they lived on land they believed to be open to homesteaders, the government declared that “Indian Territory” was reserved for Native Americans, and the Ingalls family was forced to leave one year later. Besides the birth of Carrie, their time in Kansas was marked by an exploration of the open prairies, the building of a home, successful crops, wolves, and encounters with Native Americans.

1871 saw the Ingalls family back in their old cabin in Wisconsin, but in 1873 the family again sold their home and moved to Plum Creek, just outside of Walnut Grove, Minnesota. The family first lived in a sod dugout before building a home and starting up a farm. The family enjoyed the nearby access to school and a church, and the promise of a good wheat crop. Yet, the great grasshopper plagues of the mid-1870s killed any chances for farming success for multiple seasons, and twice Charles had to leave the family to go eastward and find work. After the birth of a son, the family moved to Burr Oak, Iowa, with an offer to run a hotel and the chance to save up some money. Yet, the hotel was not a very positive environment, and Freddie Ingalls died of an unknown illness. After the birth of Grace in 1877, the family moved back to the town of Walnut Grove, during which time Mary became blind as a result from complications due to scarlet fever.

In 1879, the Ingalls family made their final move to De Smet, South Dakota. As one of the original settlers, the family went from isolated homesteaders to members of a community.
Although the entire fledgling town almost starved to death during the famed “hard winter” of 1880-1881, they eventually flourished; the girls were formally educated, and became involved in many town activities. Wilder obtained a teaching certificate and boarded twelve miles outside town, and was officially courted by Almanzo Wilder, a young homesteader ten years her senior. The two were married on August 25, 1875, when Wilder was eighteen years old.

During the next few years Laura and Almanzo experienced the birth of their daughter, Rose, a series of failed crops and hard work, the birth and death of an unnamed son, a fire that destroyed their home and many of their possessions, and a dangerous bout of diphtheria, which left Almanzo with permanent problems with his legs. After a brief stay in Florida, Laura, Almanzo, and Rose settled permanently in Mansfield, Missouri, in 1894. Over many decades, they built their “Rocky Ridge Farm” into a successful dairy and poultry farm. They became involved in the local community, which, for Wilder, included a decades-long stint as a columnist for the local newspaper, *The Missouri Ruralist*. After some encouragement from her writer daughter, Wilder began to write an autobiographical account of her life in 1929, and finished the work in 1930, when she turned sixty-three years old. In 1932, her first book was released under the genre classification of “juvenile fiction,” which all of her books were subsequently labeled. The next few decades were occupied by writing, public appearances, answering fan mail, and farm upkeep. Almanzo passed away in 1949, and Wilder chose to remain on the farm for the next seven and a half years. She died in Mansfield on February 10, 1957, three days after her ninetieth birthday.
Major Differences Between “Pioneer Girl” and the “Little House” Series

Both “Pioneer Girl” and the original eight books of the “Little House” series describe the time period from Wilder’s earliest memories, through her marriage to Almanzo Wilder. In general, all of the events described in the eight books of the original “Little House” series are located in some form within “Pioneer Girl,” although the series elaborates on those shared events, while “Pioneer Girl” contains smaller occurrences not mentioned in the series. In terms of content, the greatest deviation between “Pioneer Girl” and the “Little House” series is the absence of key family events in the published series. For example, the years 1875-1877 (roughly) are not mentioned at all, which significantly features the birth, life, and death of Freddie Ingalls. The birth of Grace Ingalls is not included, either, as well as the family’s time in Burr Oak, Iowa, and their experiences running the Master’s Hotel. In addition, the onset of Mary’s blindness, as well as her stroke, remains absent from the series. Then, too, there is a deviation from historical time in the published series. The “Little House” books never show the Ingalls family living in a location more than once, nor do they describe short stays with other family members; thus, the second stint in the Big Woods, as well as similar stops in Springfield, Missouri, and Walnut Grove, Minnesota are not present. In order to compensate for these “untold” experiences, Laura’s age is presented as roughly one year older in the “Little House” books.

Although many key events are described in both “Pioneer Girl” and the “Little House” series, historical details are altered within the later. For example, during the infamous “hard winter” of 1880-1881 in De Smet, South Dakota, the Ingalls family shared their home and

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5 A manuscript for The First Four Years, which describes the first four years of the Wilder marriage, was found by Rose after Wilder’s death, and was published in situ in 1971, three years after Rose had died. I do not focus on this work in my study, as the source material is not included in “Pioneer Girl.” Additionally, the form and writing style are grossly different than that of the “Little House” series, and, due to the nature of its discovery, it is impossible to speculate how Wilder viewed the development of the manuscript.
resources with a young couple, George and Maggie Masters, and later, their baby, who was born in the house during a blizzard and without a doctor. Similarly, due to the changes in time periods, in *Little House on the Prairie* Wilder neglects to mention that the afternoon Pa took Laura and Mary to the Native American encampment to gather beads is, in actuality, also the day Carrie is born.

Finally, Wilder takes liberties with the names of some of her “characters” in the published series. Her favorite childhood toy, while named Charlotte in the series (presumably named after her maternal grandmother), is Roxy in “Pioneer Girl.” Similarly, while Wilder did own a dog named Jack, the dog that she spent most of her childhood with was named Wolf. In *Farmer Boy*, she does not include Almanzo’s oldest sibling, Laura, nor his youngest, Perley (although, to be fair, given Almanzo’s age, Perley had not been born yet). Significantly, she also combines three distasteful peers into one (Nellie Owens, Genevieve Masters, and Stella Gilbert became Nellie Oleson), and changes the last name of her unpleasant boarders from her first teaching job, from Bouchie to Brewster. The body of my dissertation attempts to address the nature of many of these discrepancies and Wilder’s views towards them, with “Pioneer Girl” providing the catalyst for much of my analysis.

**Use of “Pioneer Girl”**

The “Pioneer Girl” transcript that is located as an addendum to this dissertation is taken from a microfilm copy of the original. The microfilm is located in the Western Historical Manuscript Collection in Columbia Missouri, and the rights to the manuscript are held by the Laura Ingalls Wilder Home Association. As the original artifact, “Pioneer Girl,” is not available
for study, I have taken my transcription entirely from the microfilm copy. Of the thirty-four “folders” (each folder, in general, equals one of the multiple notebooks upon which Wilder originally wrote all of her narratives) on microfilm, the first six contains the manuscript for “Pioneer Girl.” In my transcription, I note where each of these folders ends and begins.

Additionally, due to the fact that a transcription of one of Wilder’s handwritten/microfilm pages only approximates about one-third of a standard, typed page, I have used bold numbers in parentheses to designate Wilder’s page numbers, as I have experienced them on microfilm. For example, the first page of my transcript contains three of Wilder’s handwritten pages, so someone who is interested in gleaning how much Wilder wrote on each page needs only to scan my transcript for the bolded numbers. In addition, whenever I wish to comment on the text, such as pointing out where I was unable to discern an unintelligible word, and when I wanted to notate a piece of editing, etc., I also marked my comments in bold, so as not to confuse them with Wilder’s text.

In order to help the reader orient herself to Wilder’s text and my transcription, I include a copy of the cover and first page of “Pioneer Girl,” which is also the beginning of Folder 1. If desired, the first page of writing may be compared to the start of my transcript in the addendum. In addition to these first few pages, other examples of Wilder’s handwriting within “Pioneer Girl” are periodically inserted into the body of this dissertation. This is primarily done to highlight a particular discussion or to clarify a potentially confusing description of her text. Yet,

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6 My research began with an accumulation of data and primary source material. The Laura Ingalls Wilder Home Association in conjunction with the State Historical Society of Missouri: Western Manuscript Collection, provided microfilm copies of “Pioneer Girl,” as well as drafts of many of the books within the “Little House” series. Also included are correspondence between Wilder, Lane, librarians, and fans. As most of these works are unpublished and difficult to read in terms of handwriting and quality of microfilm, I have transcribed “Pioneer Girl” in its entirety as well as small portions of other works as necessary. The transcript and copies of the microfilm are used here by permission. Additionally, while the published series will be used as an occasional reference point within my dissertation, it will be considered as a supplement to my research involving “Pioneer Girl.”
I wish to note that I have also included these snippets of handwritten text with the hope of reproducing a similar experience to what I had while transcribing and analyzing Wilder’s original text. For me, engaging Wilder’s handwriting felt more personal and intimate than that of her published works. Furthermore, the act of re-reading and re-writing her text was a continual, evolving performance as I discovered new meanings both within the text and how I defined myself in relation to it. As I re-read the following chapters, that performance continues to evolve. When encountered by the reader for the first time, a new performance begins.
Fig. 1: Cover of first notebook containing “Pioneer Girl.”
Once upon a time, many years ago, Pa stopped the horses and the wagon they were pulling away off the prairie in Indian Territory.

"Well, Caroline," he said, "this is the place we've been looking for. Might as well camp."

So Pa and Ma got down from the wagon. Pa unhitched the horses and picketed them, tied them to long ropes fastened to wooden pegs driven in the ground, so they could eat the grass.

Then he made the campfire out of bits of willow leaves from the creek nearby.

She cooked supper over the fire and after we had eaten, sister Mary and I were put to bed in the wagon and Pa and Ma sat around by the fire. Pa would bring the horses and tie them to the wagon. Before he and Ma came to sleep, I was in the wagon too.

I lay and looked through the opening in the wagon cover at the campfire and Pa and Ma sitting there. It was so warm and so still with the stars shining down on the great, flat land where no one lived.

There was a long, scared sound off in the night.
Chapter 2
Coming to Writing: Contextualizing the Author

In his essay “Approaching Laura Ingalls Wilder: Challenges and Opportunities for the Biographer,” John E. Miller laments the lack of primary source materials highlighting Wilder’s thoughts and feelings. He declares:

The biggest problem facing any researcher of Laura Ingalls Wilder is to find sources that reveal very much about her personality and her manner of thinking […] There are no diaries […] There are no gut-spilling journals.⁷ There are a limited number of letters […] The task for the biographer of Laura Ingalls Wilder thus becomes one of piecing together information from a variety of sources, which directly or indirectly throw light on her life and career. (14-15)

While Miller’s statement discloses a belief that Wilder’s “Little House” series cannot be relied upon as a trusted source for revealing her personality and inner life (while he grants that “Pioneer Girl” may have more of a “factual” basis, he infers that it lacks the intimate reflections he desires), the frustration he shows is far from a singular experience. As much as Wilder wrote the basic story of her childhood and process of becoming a young woman, there are scant few pieces of her self-reflexive writing that exist today, leading to a gap in her feelings and private thoughts regarding her adult life. In particular, when compared to Rose Wilder Lane’s multiple journals and letters that detail her private descriptions of depression, fluctuating self-esteem, and her at-times turbulent relationship with her mother, the Wilder materials appear scant.

While it is entirely plausible that old letters and were written and then thrown out (accidently or purposefully), it also seems unlikely that such documents will suddenly be

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⁷ The classification of “Pioneer Girl” may or may not fall under the category of journal, depending on one’s personal viewpoint. Elsewhere in the article, Miller refers to the work as her “autobiography” (15). As Miller also notes, Wilder did compose one brief diary during the move from De Smet, South Dakota; to Mansfield, Missouri; in 1894, titled On the Way Home.
Mancino

recovered. As Lane discovered the manuscripts for *On the Way Home* and *The First Four Years* among her mother’s belongings after her death in 1957, it seems unlikely that new works will be discovered fifty years after the fact. Yet, it is also possible that Wilder is simply not prone to such intimate types of writing. In “Pioneer Girl,” Wilder reveals a plausible motivation regarding her resistance to reveal the extremely personal; in noting her disapproval of an extremely loud and emotional individual testimony during a church service, Wilder states: “It someway offended my sense of privacy. It seemed to me that the things between one and God should be between him and God like loving one’s mother. One didn’t go around saying ‘I love my mother, she has been good to me.’ One just loved her and did things that she liked one to do” (48). This sense of decorum is typical of the time period; Joanna Stratton, speaking of writing and cultural practices of pioneering women in the nineteenth century, observes that “Intimate topics, such as pregnancy, childbirth and death were addressed in euphemisms of the time, while love and sex were avoided altogether” (25). Thus, for Wilder, expressions of her innermost self can be difficult to uncover, particularly from the traditional standpoint of the modern biographer and historian.

As such, I advocate a reading of Laura Ingalls Wilder that utilizes those lenses that recognize the cultural contexts that surrounded her early life and formation as an author. In this chapter, I analyze the identity of Wilder through surveys of the American Pioneer Movement and American First Wave Feminism. I pay particular attention to those artifacts and performances of Wilder’s that mirror the time periods of these two movements: Wilder’s family history and narratives of her earlier life in the mid-1800s, and her decades-long career as a columnist for the *Missouri Ruralist* during the early twentieth century.  

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8 As discussed later in this chapter, I view the American Pioneer Movement as lasting roughly from 1800-1880s, and American First Wave Feminism from 1850-1920s.
movements in American history that began before her birth and ended during the composition of “Pioneer Girl,” I am choosing to engage with cultural contexts that helped produce her identity. I am thus attempting to meet her on her own terms, with what Joanna Stratton refers to as the “euphemisms of the time.”

As Wilder’s own upbringing – as well as that of her parents – was heavily influenced by the values and physical westward migration of the pioneer movement, I hold that an analysis of how the Ingalls viewed and performed pioneerism will provide a greater understanding of Wilder’s identity. During a speech given in Detroit in the 1930’s, Wilder alludes to the deep roots of pioneerism in her family:

Mother was descended from an old Scotch family and inherited the Scotch thriftiness which helped with the livelihood. Although born and raised on the frontier she was an educated, cultured woman […] Father’s ancestors arrived on the Mayflower and he was born in N.Y. State. But he also was raised on the frontier. Pa was always jolly, inclined to be reckless and loved his violin. So Ma taught us books and trained us in our manners, while Pa taught us other things and entertained us. (*Sampler* 216-217)

Wilder acknowledges that the lessons her parents imparted were impacted by life as a pioneer: her mother retained the value of education despite a lack of formal opportunity and learned to be resourceful, while her father possessed a wandering spirit and provided entertainment amongst isolation. Yet, while she notes that her parents “taught” her, I explore what she did with those teachings, how she felt about settling new territory, and what the frontier may have meant to Wilder, as well as her adult ideas on politics and the concepts behind feminism. Furthermore, as Wilder’s newspaper column deals mainly with personal anecdotes and reflections on everything
from the details of farming life to musings on politics, there is still an opportunity to glean
Wilder’s connection to the social forces of her time period, as well as track her development as a writer leading up to “Pioneer Girl.”

**Pioneering Woman**

In an oft-quoted speech delivered in Detroit in 1937, Laura Ingalls Wilder describes some of the impetus to write about her life:

> I realized I had seen and lived it all-all the successive phases of the frontier, first the frontiersman then the pioneer, then the farmers and the towns. Then I understood that in my own life I represented a whole period of American History. That the frontier was gone and agricultural settlements had taken its place when I married a farmer […] I wanted children now to understand more about the beginnings of things, to know what is behind the things they see - what it is that made America as they know it…. (*Sampler* 217)

In voicing her concern that children are divorced from the history of material and social conditions that shape the world in which they live, Wilder suggests that knowing and understanding processes of development contain worth. Significantly, she asserts that individual subjectivity is valuable in constructing the “beginning of things,” and acknowledges her own involvement and subsequent agency. Not only is she able to make observations and conclusive statements about the growth and “making” of society, but she is also a participant via her lived experience. Thus, as Wilder begins to write about her childhood in “Pioneer Girl,” she articulates that she has power in creating a record of her developing identity, and also notes that her personal lived experience is directly connected to the overall construction of culture.
As the title of her personal narrative, “Pioneer Girl,” divulges, the logistics and spirit of the American Pioneer Movement figure largely into Wilder’s lexicon; additionally, Wilder’s development as a female subject is presented with equal importance. As she recognizes that being a pioneer designates one who has the ability to shape and create out of unknown territory, she transfers that agency onto herself by connecting it to her “girl”-hood. Similarly, as Wilder describes her belief that children who have knowledge also have power in shaping culture, her use of the word “Girl” suggests she is someone at the forefront of creation. As Wilder’s narrative concentrates on her own process of growth from girl to “young lady,” she continually gains knowledge and agency in shaping and affecting whatever frontier she encounters. Moreover, as the word signifies one who is literally and figuratively engaged in the processes of maturation (as opposed to an adult woman, which implies that certain types of development have already taken place), she further claims a space that values her own learning and movement as parallel and connected to that of the world around her. Since “Pioneer Girl” is pointedly written from the reflexive perspective of an adult woman, she confers that to be a girl – one who can participate in making the world – is more of a state of mind and a poetic discourse than a strict chronological age. As the reader follows Wilder’s evolution from her starting position of young girl, she may also gain the ability to further understand and shape her own version of pioneering.

At the same time, Wilder also engages in a kind of proto-feminism as she reconfigures the normal signifier of the American pioneer from male to female. Most traditionally accepted documents of history have been written by, for, and from a patriarchal perspective, while the feminine voice and female experience has largely been absent or, at best, subordinate. As Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. bluntly states in his introduction to *Pioneer Women*, “For women have constituted the most spectacular casualty of traditional history. They have made up at least half
of the human race; but you could never tell that by looking at the books historians write. The forgotten man is nothing to the forgotten woman” (11-12). Feminists work to redress this imbalance by acknowledging that male history is not the same as female history, and encourages women to be agents in the making of their history. The *American Heritage College Dictionary* defines pioneer in part as “One who goes into unknown or unclaimed territory to settle” (1059). Yet, as the term “frontiersman” suggests, historically speaking, much of white American western pioneering movement is perceived to be conducted by men. While there are certainly documented instances of women holding down homesteads, the majority of the movement took place either with single men or with men spearheading the activity publicly while women engaged in the private sphere of home life. Although “Pioneer Girl” does employ a more traditional / patriarchal familial model in that Wilder’s father primarily leads the Ingalls’ family travels, Wilder’s title further suggests that women can and do participate in originating new territory.

By the time Laura Ingalls Wilder was born in 1867, she was serendipitously positioned in the prime century of “The American West,” and, being born at Wisconsin’s western border, was located at the movement’s longitudinal gateway. Yet, the history of the western migration of the Ingalls family did not begin with Wilder’s birth. Wilder’s paternal ancestor, Robert Warren, was born in England and travelled to modern day Massachusetts on the Mayflower in 1620. Similarly, her maternal great-grandmother, Martha Morse Tucker, emigrated from Scotland and married in the same state in 1799; thus Wilder has multiple familial connections to

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9 Despite the fact that Wilder was born in 1867, two years after the end of the Civil War, the subject is virtually non-existent in both “Pioneer Girl” and the published series, and appears to have personally affected the Ingalls and Quiner families less than many other Americans. Wilder did have a few uncles who fought with the Union, including Ma’s brother, Joseph, who died from wounds inflicted at the Battle of Shiloh in 1862. In *Little House in the Big Woods*, Pa’s young brother, George, is described as “wild,” having run away to be a drummer boy at age fourteen years. Although she has an initial fear of him, Laura enjoys meeting Uncle George at a family “sugaring off” dance.
settlement and migration during the formation of America. Indeed, Charles Ingalls (Pa) was born in Cuba, New York, and trekked first to Illinois before settling in Wisconsin at roughly fifteen years old in 1851 (Ingalls Family Anderson). Caroline Ingalls’s (Ma’s) mother, Charlotte, was a seamstress near Boston in 1830 before moving to settle in Wisconsin; as a placard marking the town of her birth records, “Caroline was the earliest known settler born in the Town of Brookfield” (absoluteastronomy.com). In consequence, Wilder was raised by parents who were products of the western expansion movement.

Yet, it is important to note that Wilder does not simply inherit a family history rich with movement and settlement, but a philosophical and political environment steeped in the celebration of all forms of American pioneerism. As her forebears began to vacate New England, the beginnings of the pioneer movement were already underway. The Louisiana Purchase of 1803 doubled the size of the existing United States and prompted a flurry of westward expansion. At the same time, many Americans developed attitudes of duty and entitlement in regards to the new land they began to inhabit; noted journalist John L O’Sullivan coined the term “Manifest Destiny” to describe this growing perspective of pioneering in 1845. In his essay, “Annexation,” O’Sullivan calls for the Republic of Texas to be admitted into the Union, arguing that it is the “manifest destiny [of the United States] to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions” (6).

Characterized by a belief in a God-given mandate to expand and colonize the land that would become the United States, Manifest Destiny was a phrase popularized throughout the 1840s and 1850s. Often used as a justification for imperialist practices, I contend that the national fervor towards Manifest Destiny was at least a partial influence on Pa, who, born in 1836, was in his teens and twenties at the height of its propagation.
In an often-discussed conversation in *Little House on the Prairie*, Pa articulates his reasoning for building a home in Indian Territory, Kansas, despite the fact that many Native Americans still populated the area. In response to Laura’s queries, he explains that,

“When white settlers come into a country, the Indians have to move on. The government is going to move these Indians farther west, any time now. That’s why we’re here, Laura. White people are going to settle all this country, and we get the best land because we get here first and take our pick. Now do you understand?” “Yes, Pa.” Laura said. “But, Pa, I thought this was Indian Territory. Won’t it make the Indians mad to have to--” “No more questions, Laura,” Pa said firmly. “Go to sleep.” (236-237)

During Pa’s justification, he expresses many views that parallel those upheld in the concept of Manifest Destiny. Pa clearly privileges white settlement over Native American ties to the land, while somewhat confusingly and oxymoronically noting that whites have gotten “here first.” Pa reveals a belief in the supremacy and strength of the US government, and pointedly notes that western expansion will not end until “all” of the land – and its inhabitants – have been successfully colonized.

As “Pioneer Girl” and (particularly) the “Little House” series describe multiple instances in which Pa states that he has respect for many Native Americans (unlike Ma, who remains fearful and prejudiced), it is notable that he cannot fully extend empathy to their plight. Later, in response to a neighbor’s racist statement that “the only good Indian is a dead Indian,” Pa disagrees – to an extent. Laura describes his reaction, stating that “He figured that Indians would be as peaceable as anybody else if they were left alone. On the other hand, they had been moved west so many times that naturally they hated white folks. But an Indian ought to have sense
enough to know when he was licked” (284). This conversation is precipitated by a Native American “Jamboree / War Cry” in response to forced removal from their lands and its settlement by whites, and Pa is unexpectedly lucid in his explanation of their anger and frustration. Yet, he is not moved to question his own right to access that same land. Moreover, as Pa later receives word that the government is reserving the land that the Ingalls are living on solely for Native Americans, Pa exhibits the same emotions he describes above, and, while the family moves shortly afterward (to Plum Creek, Minnesota, in the published series, and back to their old house near Pepin, Wisconsin in both “Pioneer Girl” and in historical fact), he does not do so with the attitude of resignation towards “being licked” that he prescribes to the Native Americans. Thus Pa, whose upbringing was entrenched in the excitement and colonialist attitudes of Manifest Destiny, is unable to extend his beliefs and actions of empathy beyond himself.

Yet, while Wilder’s identity is shaped by her father’s actions, she is able to see beyond absolute colonialist attitudes of the time. Importantly, as Wilder shares her father’s desire to continually travel westward to less-populated frontiers (described in greater detail below), she clearly experiences difficulty coming to an understanding regarding what it means to “remove” those who occupied it first. As she sensitively begins to inquire how Native Americans might feel - and what their actions might be - at the knowledge of their forced move, she alludes to larger problems of imperialism. While it is unknown whether the nature of her questioning stems more from a standpoint of morality or fear for personal safety, Pa does not let her finish and does not give her any semblance of an answer; perhaps because Wilder states that the published series is for children, she did not wish to totally disrupt the romanticism of the mythologized west. And yet, it is significant to note that Laura is portrayed as one who
questions; in her quest to know and understand both herself and the world, she is not afraid to test boundaries. Despite the fact that adequate answers are not always provided, the fact remains that Wilder seeks them, questioning the validity of such a philosophy and the reality of its practice.

While the Ingalls family was not able to permanently settle on the lands in Indian Territory, they had ample opportunities to search for a suitable home elsewhere, as they were heavily motivated by The Homestead Act of 1862. The Homestead Act, which states that any citizen, twenty-one years and older, could acquire up to one-hundred sixty acres of free land beyond that of the original thirteen colonies, proclaims:

> Be it enacted [...] That any person who is the head of a family, or who has arrived at the age of twenty-one years [...] be entitled to enter one quarter-section or a less quantity of unappropriated public lands, upon which said person may have filed a pre-emption claim, or which may, at the time the application is made, be subject to pre-emption at one dollar and twenty-five cents, or less, per acre [...] that said entry is made for the purpose of actual settlement and cultivation…

(ourdocuments.gov)

Under The Homestead Act, the process of acquiring land involved filing a claim, cultivating the land and living on it for six months per year for five years, and then procuring the official deed of sale from the government. For many, the passage of this law served as a catalyst towards augmentation of the “American Dream;” as adult men, women, immigrants intending to become US citizens, and freed/ex-slaves all had the opportunity to claim and develop land for a low price. Thus a large influx of people into the western, uninhabited country brought with them the hopes of an independent, self-reliant life (ourdocuments.gov).
During the seventy years of its prime, The Homestead Act granted over 1.5 million people the titles to their land, the totals of which made up ten percent of all the land in the United States at one point. As the Ingalls family spent the better part of ten years travelling through the Midwest during the 1870’s, Wilder’s childhood embodies the ideal of the pioneer movement. Beginning in Indian Territory / Kansas, and ending in De Smet, South Dakota, the Ingalls family persevered in their quest to “prove up” on their various Homestead lands, eventually succeeding in South Dakota. Yet, particularly for Wilder and Pa, the most rewarding part of the Homesteading experience is perhaps not the end product, but the journey it takes to get there. In *By the Shores of Silver Lake*, Laura expresses her desire to continue moving west despite entering the space of what is to be the final destination for the Ingalls family:

> The wings [of birds flying south] and the golden weather and the tang of frost in the mornings made Laura want to go somewhere. She did not know where. She wanted only to go. “Let’s go west,” she said one night after supper […] Oh, Pa let’s go on west!” “Mercy, Laura!” Ma said. “Whatever--” She could not go on. “I know, little Half-Pint,” said Pa, and his voice was very kind. “You and I want to fly like the birds. But long ago I promised your Ma that you girls should go to school. You can’t go to school and go west. When this town is built there’ll be a school here. I’m going to get a homestead, Laura, and you girls are going to school.” (126-127)

While Laura’s desires to continue travelling west are typical during the time period, she significantly does not express an interest in a particular destination, nor do her goals appear to involve or advocate imperialist thought. Instead, she just wants “to go,” as she identifies with the freedom of bird wings, and the cyclical pull of the seasons. Yet, as Pa’s response exhibits,
the very nature of homesteading is equal parts exploration into the unknown, and then transforming the nature of that “unknown” as it is settled with houses, people, and crops. In articulating the paradox of pioneering, Pa outlines the defining characteristics that embody the rise and fall of the frontier.

Furthermore, as both “Pioneer Girl” and the “Little House” series demonstrate, both Pa and Ma clearly represent and embody both branches of the performance of pioneering. As noted above in his response to Laura’s yearning to travel, Pa is an explorer who delights in encountering unknown, “wild” territory. Yet, Ma is “cultured,” continually striving for a “civilized” home amongst dugouts and covered wagons, and pushing for the kind of formal education that only exists in settled territory. And while both Pa and Ma perform their seemingly oppositional roles, they connect in their core pioneering values of capability and independence. Wilder outlines these values through a description of her parents following the Civil War:

In the depression following the Civil War my parents, as so many others, lost all their savings in a bank failure. They farmed the rough land on the edge of the Big Woods in Wisconsin. They struggled with the climate and fear of Indians in the Indian Territory. For two years in succession they lost their crops to the grasshoppers on the Banks of Plum Creek. They suffered cold and heat, hard work and privation as did others of their time. When possible they turned the bad into good. If not possible, they endured it. Neither they nor their neighbors begged for help. No other person, nor the government, owed them a living. They owed that to themselves and in some way they paid the debt. And they found their own way. (Sampler 180)
Here, Wilder highlights both the perseverance and hard work required to survive the harshness and isolation of pioneering and settling the frontier. When the family lost their savings, the Homestead Act provided hope for a new beginning; in turn, property rights, grasshopper plagues, and battling the elements brought strength of character.

In spite of uncontrollable circumstances, Wilder notes that Pa and Ma used their agency in “[finding] their own way.” After a decade of travel, the Ingalls family permanently settled in De Smet, South Dakota. Although Pa gave up his dream of continuing west, he did have the pleasure of building up an entirely unsettled area and played a very real and consequential role in building the community. For Ma, the satisfaction of “her way” came in sending all of her children to school (including Mary’s tenure at the College of the Blind in Vinton, Iowa), and building a permanent residence. Thus, each achieved their own measure of success in their version of pioneering. While Wilder’s narrative of her parents’ achievements suggests that she is proud of their abilities, I infer that she uses their examples of independence to formulate her own performance of pioneering. As Wilder questions the morality of her father’s colonialist attitudes, yet resists her mother’s vision of total domesticity, she begins a journey for discovering what the frontier means for her.

In discerning how Wilder viewed and embodied the pioneer and the frontier, multiple scholars have noted the similar origins of Wilder and famed American historian Frederick Jackson Turner. Turner, born in November of 1861, was just six and a half years older than Wilder, and, as he was born in Portage, Wisconsin, grew up just 180 miles southeast of Wilder’s birthplace of Pepin. Originating from the same time and place, both Wilder and Turner spend considerable energies towards understanding the social contexts that shaped the world of their childhoods. Turner delivered his germinal essay, “The Significance of the Frontier in American
History,” before an audience of the American Historical Association, which met in Chicago, Illinois, during the World’s Fair in 1893. In it, he outlines his thesis that the core of a uniquely American character and spirit is derived from the act of frontierism and the processes of colonization. He argues that,

The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development […] In this advance, the frontier is the outer edge of the wave-- the meeting point between savagery and civilization […] That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom-these are traits of the frontier […] Movement has been its dominant fact… (Gutenberg.org)

Here, Turner introduces the radical idea that identity directly correlates to the evolution of place and space, and that the independent American spirit develops in its purest state when its citizens experience the juxtaposition of “civilized” life in uninhabited terrain. For Turner, this porous space “between savagery and civilization” is a continually evolving performance; it is the tension between the two states that is the core of “true” American-ness, yet that energy/identity is only generated at the moment of their meeting. Turner’s performance of the frontier is similar to Pa and Ma’s identification with the tension of pioneerism; as the two embody the ideals of movement and settlement, it is only where the two join that the full range of pioneering can take place. Yet, as Pa and Ma concentrate on more literal applications of pioneering (including
homesteading and farming), Turner expands the idea to include symbolic and non-normative representations of the pioneer and the frontier. Accordingly, as the frontiersman journeys farther from the originary starting point and into the “wilderness,” those prized qualities of restlessness, individualism, and an aversion to controlling, hierarchal institutions increase exponentially.

While some critics of Turner’s “frontier thesis” are wary of the imperialist monikers in his writing, others contend that he was simply using the parlance of the time, and that his language suggests he was not merely referring to expanding geography, but rather utilized metaphor to address industrialization and widespread intellectual growth. As Turner theorized that the land of America’s frontier was officially settled by the end of the nineteenth century, he speculated on the changing landscape of the American psyche. Decades of criticism have hypothesized on the far reaches of what identities the new American frontier can perform – whether a literal expansion overseas or an exploration of technology and education. In his essay, “Revisiting the Vanishing Frontier: The Legacy of Frederick Jackson Turner,” William Cronon observes that the value of the frontier lies in its ability to continually remain active within public consciousness. He asks, “What, then, justifies yet another essay about Frederick Jackson Turner and his frontier? Simply this: we have not yet figured out a way to escape him. His work remains the foundation not only for the history of the West, but also for much of the rest of American history as well […] We continue to use the word “frontier” as if it meant something” (160). Thus, it is up to the individual to experience the frontier in whichever way she chooses.

Historian Ray Allen Billington has written multiple works on the Frederick Jackson Turner and the development and decline of the frontier. His 1958 essay, “The American Frontier,” succinctly outlines the major critiques of Turner’s Frontier Thesis (among other things). He observes that the thesis began to encounter significant opposition in the 1930’s, and highlights two trends in criticism as particularly detrimental. Billington discerns that, “On the one hand Turner was charged with denying a basic principle in modern historiography—that of multiple causation—in ascribing America’s development to the frontier and ignoring such vital forces as the class struggle, industrialization, urbanization, and the rise of transportation systems. On the other he was blamed for encouraging provincialism and isolationism through his failure to recognize the continuing influence of the East and Europe on the American West” (3).
For many, the notion of the frontier and the pioneer is being redefined within American narratives to include those experiences of those who have not been traditionally valued. Annette Kolodny discusses this aspect in her article, “Rethinking Frontier Literary History as the Stories of First Cultural Contact”: 

In effect, in my reformulation the term “frontier” comes to mean what we in the Southwest call *la frontera*, or the borderlands, that liminal landscape of changing meanings on which distinct human cultures first encounter one another’s “Otherness” and appropriate, accommodate, or domesticate it through language. By concentrating on the frontier as an inherently unstable locus of (generally unacknowledged-at least at the outset) environmental transitions and cultural interpenetrations, and by understanding the frontier as a specifiable first moment of contact between distinct cultures, we forever decenter what was previously a narrowly Eurocentric design in American literary studies. (17)

For Kolodny, the frontier is not necessarily indicative of the process of conquering and integrating oneself into a new territory, but rather the performative moment of first contact where multiple cultures engage one another. Scholars such as John E. Miller and Ann Romines have linked Wilder with Turner and Kolodny, noting her openness to experiencing this “meeting” with other cultures without judgment. Her often-discussed desire to encounter a “papoose” is a prime example, and her willingness to converse with her Swedish neighbors can serve as another, particularly as Laura learns to speak a kind of broken-Swedish to communicate with one Mrs. Nelson, who cannot speak English. Despite the fact that her parents consider such an act “beneath her,” she seeks out a meeting with her neighbors, perhaps *because* of their difference (“Pioneer Girl”). As Pa and Ma admonish Laura for attempting to learn Swedish for they view it
as diminishing her superior “American-ness,” Kolodny notes that the balance of power is key in her reconfiguration of the frontier; for her, each party may claim a position of privilege in their ability to look and to understand. As Laura acknowledges the identity and agency of the “Others” she encounters, she participates in Kolodny’s definition of pioneering and experiencing the frontier.

Yet, I also argue that Wilder is able to perform the pioneer and the frontier on a symbolic level as well. One definition of “pioneer” is “One who opens up new areas of thought, research, or development” (*Dictionary* 1059). With this in mind, Wilder’s connection to frontierism and pioneering is not limited to developing and mapping the geographical areas in which she lived, but may be viewed as an awareness of the limited amount of female personal narratives in and about the time in which she lived. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar articulate this phenomenon within their discussion of Harold Bloom’s concept of the “anxiety of influence.” This “anxiety” may occur when writers compare their ideas and work to a litany of predecessors, and judge themselves hopelessly unoriginal and inadequate. Gilbert and Gubar argue that, because most art has been created by males within a patriarchy, the experience of a woman writer developing her own work and point of view is profoundly different and outside the realm of an overriding, predisposed purview. Instead, there is a burgeoning trend in which “women writers have seen themselves as pioneers in a creativity so intense that their male counterparts have probably not experienced its analog since the Renaissance […] today’s female writer feels she is helping to create a viable tradition which is at last definitively emerging” (50). Thus, Wilder’s chosen title of her first full-length work, “Pioneer Girl,” may reflect an awareness that the content, form, and function of her written undertaking is a groundbreaking, powerful act. As
she is able to see herself as a participant in a traditionally masculine experience, she affords herself value.

Additionally, viewed in conjunction with “Girl,” there is irony in the statement that a girl can participate in pioneering, and implies that perhaps the very writing of a feminine life can be seen as a pioneering act. This is also relational to the notion that Wilder wants American children to know where their world came from, so that they may better understand themselves and their world. As she is writing herself as a “girl”/child, she is ascribing to herself a kind of foreknowledge, and she also gives power to anyone who may empathize with the main figure, therefore affording them agency in identity construction. The title of “Pioneer Girl” works on multiple planes to create new signifiers for what it means to be a pioneer. Through her writing, Wilder claims agency not only in her lived experience, but also in the act of re-telling, and by extension, re-living.

As Wilder re-writes her life, she anticipates Cixous’s call for women to “write themselves, into history” and become the dominant subject of their lives. The beginning of “Pioneer Girl” introduces this outlook in the primacy of the subjective experience of a young girl, as well as its connection to the act of pioneering. Wilder writes:

> Once upon a time years and years ago, Pa stopped the horses and the wagon they were hauling away out on the prairie in Indian Territory [...] There was a long, scared sound off in the night (2) and Pa said it was a wolf howling. It frightened me a little, but we were safe in the wagon with its nice tight cover to keep out the wind and the rain. The wagon was home, we had lived in it so long and Pa’s rifle was hanging at the side where he could get it quickly to shoot the wolf. (1)
On a literal plane, the notion of traveling to look for suitable places to camp – and, as described after, a space for a new home - foregrounds the overall theme of pioneering in her life story, as the Ingalls family moved over half a dozen times and in six different states. In travelling into unknown territory, Wilder echoes that paradox of exploration and settlement as she describes both her fright of the wilderness and her feelings of safety in the wagon. However, on a symbolic level, Wilder also explores the frontier of her life’s narrative and the formation and performance of her self. The prospect of writing a pioneering life story with a female subject is also a new experience amidst a multitude of masculinist narratives. Yet, while, such an examination may also be frightening new territory, one hopes she found it equally as satisfying.

**Charting the Construction of Feminism: The First Wave**

In June of 1918, when the prospect of woman’s suffrage loomed on the political horizon, a fifty-one year old Laura Ingalls Wilder addressed the changing lives of women in her newspaper column in the *Missouri Ruralist.*

Noting the gradual absence of the term “old maid” from vernacular language, she asserts,

> In the days when old maids flourished, the one important fact in a woman’s life was whether or not she was married, and as soon as a girl child reached maturity, she was placed in one of two classes and labeled accordingly. She was either Mrs. ----- or else an old maid […] when her work in and for the world became of more importance to the world than her private life, the fact of whether or not she was married did not received the emphasis that it formerly did […] marriage is not now the end and aim of [a woman’s] existence. (218-219)

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11 All *Missouri Ruralist* articles referenced in this dissertation may be found in the compilation: *Little House in the Ozarks: A Laura Ingalls Wilder Sampler, The Rediscovered Writings.*
With her contention that a label need not dictate the whole of women’s existence, Wilder implicitly acknowledges the constructed nature of society. She astutely notes that the binary of marriage / semi-ridiculed spinsterhood is not an identifier innately chosen and embodied by all women, but rather is part of the larger paradigm of an andocentric culture where men wield primary power and women are marked as lesser “class” citizens. Yet, despite, the rigidity of prescribed gender roles, Wilder argues it is possible for women to claim agency in defining their sense of self and worth. As women began to set a precedence where they defined and valued their (“her”) own work, they began to withdraw their dependence on men. Thus, women could claim a sense of self that is not formed in relation to a man, but stems more from within.

In her book, *Feminism and Theatre*, Helene Keyssar advocates that feminist drama is not based on an affirmation of the sustained self, but on the possibilities of its remaking and an explosion of its boundaries. She notes that,

> As the contemporary playwright Honor Moore has remarked, whether or not they identify themselves publicly and politically as “feminists,” there are now playwrights whose “art is related to their condition as women. The plays created in the context of that recognition do not just mirror social change but assert a new aesthetic based on the transformation rather then recognition of persons. (1)

While Keyssar refers specifically to theatre, she readily admits that the arc of transformation extends to the lives of real women, with the ultimate goal of empowerment. For her, the stronghold of patriarchy can only be loosened when women imagine and perform the changes they wish to see in their lives and in the world around them. As Wilder exemplifies in her observations about women and marriage, women can claim power to change their life circumstances.
As noted above, there is a gaping absence of strong female voices recorded in a traditional patriarchal history. Thus, it makes sense to search for feminine additions to that history outside masculine lenses, boundaries, and labels. As both Keyssar theorizes and Wilder observes, the process of charting women’s position and growth comes from artifacts and performances that reflect “their condition as women.” As noted in Chapter 1, Virginia Woolf’s well-known essay, “Women in Fiction,” notes that the female voice does in fact exist, but that its private containers have not been privileged by an andocentric culture:

Why, we ask at once, was there no continuous writing done by women before the eighteenth century? […] The answer lies at present locked in old diaries, stuffed away in old drawers, half obliterated in the memories of the aged. It is to be found in the lives of the obscure – in those almost unlit corridors of history where the figures of generations of women are so dimly, so fitfully perceived. (33)

Thus, Woolf notes the existence of women’s history and the documentation of women’s lives, and urges others to afford them the same worth that are given to masculine artifacts. Notably, as Woolf is doing the kind of writing she advocates, she radically performs the very example that others may follow.

Moreover, Woolf’s call towards strengthening the visibility of women’s voices and empowerment does not exist within a vacuum. At the time of “Women in Fiction’s” writing in 1929, Wilder was also composing her first, full-length autobiographical piece: “Pioneer Girl.” As “Pioneer Girl” is a hand-written work on a fifty cent orange tablet found at the grocery, it may be viewed as the epitome of a feminine voice and personal narrative untouched by concerns of a commercialized, publication industry run within a patriarchal society. While Wilder has stated multiple times that she was inspired to write her life in order to teach children about the
past, she has never (to my knowledge) discussed the catalyst/s for choosing the time period in which she began to write her personal narrative. Significantly, Wilder’s early observations within the *Missouri Ruralist* and the period leading up to the inception of “Pioneer Girl” were encompassed by the period of “first wave” American feminism; a time when women’s suffrage and personal freedoms were on the national radar and thus infiltrated the context of her earlier writings.

The first wave / liberal feminism is generally viewed as occurring between 1850-1920, a period coinciding not only with the time period of the action within the “Little House” series, but also the period leading up to its writing. Yet, as the dates are chosen around events which mark extensive public consciousness of sexism, notions of female inequality were brewing long before widespread activism took place. Interestingly, the seeds of American feminism began to develop before there was an “official” America; over three months before the Continental Congress declared an independent United States on July 4, 1776, Abigail Adams discussed the parallels between sexist attitudes towards women and the oppression of the thirteen colonies by the British Empire. On March 31, 1776, Adams wrote to her husband, John Adams - an author of the Declaration of Independence and future president of the United States – and pleaded with him to consider the rights of women as he did those of men in his role of formulating the new government. She asks, “and by the way in the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would Remember the Ladies […] If particular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Rebelion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation” (Rossi 10-11). Here, Adams displays all the major tropes that have come to be characterized as liberal feminist
thought / first wave feminism: in asking that women receive the same treatment men are enjoying, she reveals a belief that the differences between the two is negligible; she ultimately advocates participation in a hegemonic system, and she literally pursues public and political visibility and representation. Yet, as both Adams and Woolf argue the reality of women’s oppression, so then does it take over one-hundred years before women are even granted the rights argued for in the 1700s. As such, it is not surprising that there are precious few pieces of information regarding the lives of Wilder’s female ancestors, let alone anything that directly links them to the first wave / liberal feminist thought. Still, there is evidence that the values of self-worth, education and self-reliance were passed down from the Quiner women.

Wilder’s maternal grandmother, Charlotte Tucker (Quiner Holbrook), was born in 1809, thirty-three years following Adams’s call to her husband. A first generation American, it is known that Tucker worked as a schoolteacher, and, based on newspaper evidence and family anecdote, was self-employed and advertised a dressmaking business while twenty-one years old and a single woman. It is not surprising, then, that Wilder’s mother, Caroline Lake Quiner (Ingalls), was raised in an environment that stressed knowledge and social sophistication. As an

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12 American feminism is characterized by three “waves” - first, second, and third – which may correspond to either a time period or a set of beliefs. While some view each wave as synonymous with the name that references its tropes - liberal, radical, and material – I believe it is necessary to highlight some key distinctions, in order to produce greater opportunities for their expression and meaning-making. For me, use of the wave model as a means of categorization is helpful as reference point in locating the major issues and discourses associated with particular social movements/time periods. Loosely speaking, the first wave encompasses 1850-1920, the second wave emerges in the wake of World War II and peaks in the 1960’s and 1970’s, and the third wave gains momentum through the 1980’s and 1990’s into the present. While the boundaries of each wave remain porous, I use the terms in correspondence with dated social and political circumstances, described below. In using the terms liberal, radical, and materialist feminisms, I highlight philosophical beliefs and modes of discourse.

In her work, The Feminist Spectator as Critic, Jill Dolan delineates the key tenants of liberal feminism: Rather than proposing radical structural change, it suggests that working within existing social and political organizations will eventually secure women social, political, and economic parity with men […] it relies on values claimed to be universally human […] The movements general effort is to insert women into the mainstream of political and social life by changing the cultural perception of them as second-class citizens. (3-4)

Liberal feminism works to afford women the same rights and agency that men already exercise, and aims to join and expand the cultural systems already in place. Here, the main goal is to claim visibility in political and social spheres.
adult, Wilder recalls her mother: “Although born and raised on the frontier she was an educated, cultured woman. She was very quiet and gentle, but proud and particular in all manners of good breeding” (Sampler 216). Also a former schoolteacher, Caroline, too, stressed education, learning, and continual self-betterment, as noted earlier in the chapter in her desire for a settlement where her children could attend school.

As confirmed in a 1918 newspaper article in which featured an interview with Laura Ingalls Wilder, “Let’s Visit Mrs. Wilder,” these ideas also figured largely in Wilder’s own value system:

Reading Mrs. Wilder’s contributions most folks doubtless have decided that she is a college graduate. But, “my education has been what a girl could get on the frontier,” she informs us. “I never graduated from anything and only attended high school two terms.” Folks who know Mrs. Wilder, tho [sic], know that she is a cultured, well-educated woman. Combined with inherent ability, unceasing study of books has provided the necessary education and greater things have been learned from the study of life itself. (Sampler 11)

Thus, in times and places where opportunities for women’s education were slim and not always valued, all three generations of women persevered to passing their teaching examinations. While Wilder and her mother have acknowledged that learning and teaching are an essential means towards self-betterment and of financial support, those beliefs also suggest a strengthening of self-worth, as these activities imply a confidence that women have the ability to learn and that their knowledge is valuable enough to impart on others. Moreover, Charlotte’s dressmaking business serves as an example of the capability of women, and literally works to increase their visibility. In her article “Gender and Public Access: Women’s Politics in Nineteenth-Century
America,” Mary P. Ryan discusses the work of female moral reformers prior to 1850. As their publicized rallies and efforts tended to garner negative attention, they changed tactics, and “They worked away from the spotlight of newspaper publicity and public meetings […] Most crucially, they came to rest their hopes for moral regeneration not on public action but in the ministrations of women to their children and husbands in the privacy of their homes” (207). While the actions of Wilder’s mother and grandmother might not seem particularly radical, I argue that their efforts are activist in their focus on feminine capability and independence. Moreover, as Wilder educated herself in the face of adversity and went on to write her life and take on a primary role in supporting her family, she performs the very qualities her relatives advocate.

In 1848, nineteen years before Wilder’s 1867 birth, the Seneca Falls Women’s Right Convention is credited with bringing the issue of women’s suffrage to national attention. Among other issues, the two day event included a drafting of the Declaration of Sentiments; using the Declaration of Independence as a blueprint, it states:

> We hold these truths to be self evident: that all men and women are created equal […] Whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of those who suffer from it to refuse allegiance to it, and to insist upon the institution of a new government […] The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her. (Rossi 416)

Thus, over seventy years after John Adams ignored his wife’s pleas in helping to draft the original Declaration, the issue of women’s rights was formally addressed as gendered inequality became a political hotbed for attacking the highest levels of government. Subsequently, 1866 saw the formation of the American Equal Rights Association, whose goal was to “bury the
woman in the citizen” (qtd in Rossi); 1869 marked a splitting of the organization into two groups: the National Suffrage Association and the American Woman Suffrage Association; while 1890 experienced the merging into the unified American National Woman Suffrage Association. The goals of the suffragists were finally met seventy years after the construction of the Declaration of Sentiments; the Nineteenth Amendment of the Constitution states “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex. Congress shall have the power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.” It was passed by Congress on June 4, 1919, and ratified on August 18, 1920, a scant ten years before the writing of “Pioneer Girl” (OurDocuments.gov).

While Laura Ingalls Wilder does not use the word “feminist” in any of her writings or engage in traditional activities associated with the suffragist movement, I argue she participates in what Jill Dolan identifies as the base origins of all types of feminist thought: “a keen awareness of exclusion from male cultural, social, sexual, political, and intellectual discourse” (3). For, while it is clear from her writings in The Missouri Ruralist that she finds the institution of governmental politics corrupt at worst and potentially irresponsible at best, her writings still engage in observations and subversive critiques of the performance of traditional gender roles within the framework of an andocentric culture.

In April of 1919, in a column entitled “Women’s Work,” Wilder discusses the impending ratification of women’s suffrage in Missouri. She muses:

We must get rid of the habit of classing all women together politically and thinking of the “women’s vote” as one and indivisible […] there are all kinds of women as well as of men and that woman’s vote will no more bring purity into politics and can no more be counted on as a unit than can man’s vote […] Women
can no longer hide behind their husbands and fathers and brothers by saying, “I don’t pay attention to politics. That is the man’s business” […] This being the case, now that the responsibility is ours, we shall be obliged to think things out for ourselves if we are honest and fair to them and ourselves. (204-205)

While it’s possible to perceive Wilder’s motivation as stemming from fear of a “lower” or “immoral” class of women, it is significant that she recognizes the danger in universalizing womanhood, thereby treating all women in a reductive manner. Moreover, in noting that women are conditioned to view political affairs and public decisions as traditionally masculine, she demonstrates what de Beauvoir describes as her quest to “show exactly how the concept of the ‘truly feminine’ has been fashioned – why woman has been defined as the Other – and what have been the consequences from man’s point of view” (40). Perhaps the only universalism employed by feminists is that the category of “woman” has consistently been synonymous with the position of “Other” in patriarchal society. In part because feminists are keenly aware of the worldwide oppression of women, there exists virtually no generalizing discourse that would restrict thinking and therefore perpetuate the very systems feminism strive to break down. The very definitions and differences between sex and gender are constantly reviewed and revised, with debates centering around such topics about the function and relationship of biology to constructed acts of gender. As such, when Wilder communicates both the individuality of women and the need to explode the restrictions placed on public/private life,¹³ she signifies how various political, economic, and cultural frameworks function in conjunction with what it means to be

¹³ In noting Wilder’s suggestion that the concept of the universal woman is a fallacy, I wish to argue the same for the paradigm of feminine private/public. In this dissertation, my labeling of the private realms of domesticity refers to white American women in rural areas of the Midwest within the nineteenth century. Specifically, I speak of pioneering and farming women who live primary lives of isolation apart from their neighbors and/or the surrounding town, and where women’s labor produces the family’s meals and “keeps” the house. Yet, I wish to distinguish that this construction does not apply to working class women in more urban areas, who live in close contact with others and who support themselves and their families under the employment of others (i.e. as a cook or
female / feminine.

In particular, “Pioneer Girl” highlights cultural markers of femininity that provide insight into gender as a constructed practice. During the first page of the work, Wilder notes that “Pa” takes care of the horses and driving while “Ma” cooks and engages in domestic duties, thus beginning to describe the traditional divide of public / masculine life and private / feminine life. Yet, she frequently describes her mother’s daily activities as “work,” and contributing to the life that was enjoyed. In a 1922 article “The Woman’s Place,” Wilder states that the farming wife and husband are partners in maintaining land and home, as she notes, “And so, in these days of women’s clubs from which men are excluded, and men’s clubs that permit women to be honorary members only, I’m glad to know [there is a club] whereby farm men and women work together on equal terms and with equal privileges” (197). This suggests a belief that while the work that both men and women do are equally valued and should afford power as such within the home, she exists within a social realm that places a division along the types of work that are deemed socially acceptable for performance.

While Wilder lived during the bulk of the developing practice of first wave feminism, there are few overt references to the struggle within the published “Little House” series. The only time the suffragist movement / issues of feminism are directly addressed is in These Happy Golden Years, when Laura and her then-fiancé Almanzo Wilder are discussing the details of their upcoming wedding ceremony:

[Laura] summoned all her courage and said, “Almanzo, I must ask you something. Do you want me to promise to obey you?” Soberly he answered, “Of

factory worker). In addition, as Ma sometimes references, there may be immigrants of various cultures who do not experience gender in the same divided terms (such as the refusal to allow “civilized” women to work in the fields); certainly, Native Americans and former African American slaves also do not fit inside this paradigm. Ultimately, just as there is no universal woman, there is also no universal construction of what feminine / private and masculine / public entails.
course not. I know it is in the marriage ceremony, but it is only something that women say. I never knew one that did it, nor any decent man that wanted her to.”

“Well, I am not going to say I will obey you,” said Laura. “Are you for women’s rights, like Eliza?” Almanzo asked in surprise. “No,” Laura replied. “I do not want to vote. But I cannot make a promise that I will not keep, and, Almanzo, even if I tried, I do not think I could obey anybody against my better judgment. (269-70).

Similarly, in “Pioneer Girl,” Wilder adds: “Mr. Brown had promised me not to use the word “obey” in the ceremony and he kept his word” (109):

Fig. 3: Mr. Brown does not use the word “obey.”

The fact that she goes to Mr. Brown on her own suggests she retains a sense of self-worth and authority that is not dependent upon familiar patriarchal relationships; her notation that he “kept his word” insinuates she would not have hesitated to speak up had he done otherwise.

Furthermore, as Wilder refuses to use the word “obey” during her marriage vows, despite the fact that Almanzo states “it is only something that women say,” she engages in the belief that vows are performatives in the Austinian sense. As J. L. Austin notes in his essay *Performative Utterances*, there are certain spoken phrases that resonate performative potential when we imbue them with specific authority, such as when we say “I do” within a marriage ceremony. He argues, “if a person makes an utterance of this sort we should say that he is *doing* something
rather than merely saying something” (1432). In altering her marriage vows to suit her beliefs, Wilder recognizes that performed actions contribute to notions of identity.

In addition, as Wilder deliberately eschews “obeying” her husband, she breaks a traditional, patriarchal vow that can be traced back to 1549 (at least), with the publication of the first Christian model for wedding vows in “The Book of Common Prayer.” In the essay, “Women’s Exile: Interview with Luce Irigaray,” Irigaray echoes Cixous in her speculation that for a feminine language and grammar structure to truly exist, the entire system of language needs to be exploded. While that actualization may not be possible, she stresses the importance of thinking outside such hegemonic paradigms. She notes, “the way for women to be liberated is not by ‘becoming a man’ or by envying what men have and their objects, but by female subjects once again valorizing the expression of their own sex and gender” (Cameron 122). I suggest that Wilder’s performance of her chosen wedding vows in 1885 (which she upheld for over sixty four years, until Almanzo Wilder’s death in 1949) may serve as a prototype for Irigaray and Cixous’s vision. While Wilder still adheres to the general arc of traditional language in her vows, the silence that is created in the absence of the word “obey” is a performance that mirrors the slow disappearance of the power of androcentrism in women’s lives.

Then, too, as Wilder is so adamantly against the idea of being forever beholden to “anybody” else’s mood or point of view, it is curious that she tells Almanzo she is against women’s suffrage. Particularly when held against the multitude of publicized newspaper articles which advocate for equality within marriage partnerships, and her above-mentioned argument that women have a duty to be politically informed in face of the fallacy that voting “is the man’s business,” her declaration in These Happy Golden Years seems genuinely puzzling, and perhaps contradictory. One possible solution to this mystery is that Wilder had different views at age
eighteen years old than she did in her sixties, and that she exercised her prerogative to simply change her mind; another is that she found governmental institutions to be corrupt, and didn’t want to participate in their making.

Yet, a feminist reading of this paradox suggests that, just as Wilder rejected the notion of obeying, perhaps she was also uncomfortable with the *labels* of feminist or suffragist. As bell hooks notes, while not all women are comfortable with the label of feminist, they may still subscribe to the base ideas of decreasing sexual oppression. She states, “A phrase like ‘I advocate feminism’ does not imply the kind of absolutism that is suggested by ‘I am.’ It does not engage us in the either / or dualistic thinking that is the central ideological component of all systems of domination in Western society” (55).

Throughout this chapter and the two following, I present evidence that, throughout her life, Wilder turns toward her own moral compass to dictate what she deems is correct behavior. Similarly, as shown above, she tends to chafe against that which restricts her nature. As the suffragist movement was still in its early stages (officially speaking) and mainly confined to more urban areas of the country, it may be that rumors of what it stood for contradicted the values of pioneering freedom and independence that contained greater value. Yet, it is clear from Wilder’s writing that she did not view herself as incapable or inferior to men. As Wilder wryly observed in a 1937 speech while describing a car road trip, “Almanzo still loves horses as well when he was that Farmer Boy, but he doesn’t drive them now. He drives a Chrysler sedan instead, at least he holds the wheel. Of course I do the driving with my tongue” (*Sampler* 219). From a traditionally subordinate position, she finds a way to emphasize the power and authority of her narrative voice; as “Pioneer Girl” a similar position of silence, it is possible to both reclaim and expand her ability “author” her life. Thus, instead of merely dismissing Wilder’s
lack of “overt” feminism, a close reading of her text may still serve to uncover spaces of advocated feminism, where essentialized notions of the female voice may be challenged.

In the 1920’s, Lilla Day Monroe, one-time President of the Kansas State Suffrage Association and the first female lawyer to practice before the state’s Supreme Court, began to collect personal narratives of Kansas’s pioneering women. Although Monroe’s vision of publishing her findings never came to fruition due to her death in 1929, she recorded her thoughts with regards to their public consumption. During the late 1920s, she discerned:

These stories are the record of the woman side of pioneer life. They picture the deprivations, the cruel hardships, the sacrifices, the dangers as no other history ever has done or could do. Histories have to do with the political, the official governmental side of civilization. History chronicles the large and glorious deeds of the standard bearers […] and they tell nothing at all of the courageous women who keep the business of the house going. The world has never seen such hardihood, such perseverance, such devotion, nor such ingenuity in making the best of everything as was displayed by America’s pioneer women. Their like has never been known. (Stratton 21)

In astutely noting that multiple histories are required in order to paint a more well-rounded picture of pioneering life, Monroe articulates the imbalance and injustice that occurs when traditional, andocentric models are utilized to represent the falsehood of universal experience. As the belief that historic artifacts are markers of truth is quite strong, she calls for attention to be paid to the life narratives of pioneering women, and for their historic positions as unread and unknown to be reversed. I argue that the life narratives of Laura Ingalls Wilder act as a valuable

14 Monroe’s great-granddaughter, Joanna L. Stratton, continued the work of her ancestor as she reworked Monroe’s manuscript, organized her collected personal narratives, and added her contemporary reflections in the valuable and detailed Pioneer Women: Voices From the Kansas Frontier.
expression of women’s experience within the spectrum of the frontier movement and as a feminist gesture in its claim of a female subject as pioneer.

In this chapter, I have shown how Wilder incorporates the contexts of the American Pioneer Movement and First Wave feminism into her identity. In reading her life in context with the history of American westward expansion, the concept of Manifest Destiny, The Homestead Act, and Frederick Jackson Turner’s often-discussed “frontier thesis,” a new experience of pioneering history is constructed and performed. While Wilder uses her parents as models for pioneering, I argue that she takes their example of independence to add to the performance of the pioneer as she questions the status quo and relies on her own judgment as a solid foundation for moral judgment. As she matures into a woman, Wilder expands these ideals to include the equality of a farming wife and husband, and, with the advent of woman’s suffrage, the avocation that the feminine self is a worthy space to assign value. With the writing of “Pioneer Girl,” I argue that she creates a new frontier and simultaneously engages in feminist thought when she creates the performance of her life narrative. In her essay, “The Frontier of the Little House,” Anne Romines theorizes that Wilder’s works function as a space where transformations may take place. She contends: “Now the Little House has become a serial, not a static locale, and it offers possibilities of continuation and growth that give Laura, as a frontier girl protagonist, space to run and think and grow” (36). While Romines refers specifically to the multiple volumes of the published series, the same arc is present within Wilder’s pioneering childhood, her views on the continuing achievements of women in society, and within the narrative of “Pioneer Girl.” Thus, in viewing Wilder’s developing identity through the lens of historical context, I uncover different permutations to experience the truths of the time, as well as multiple truths in the process of her becoming.
Chapter Three
Putting Herself Into the Text: Becoming “Laura”

For Laura Ingalls Wilder, the experiences of her formative years influenced the adult she became. Describing the disappearing culture of her youth in the early 1870s, she states, “I remember seeing deer that father had killed hanging in the trees surrounding our forest home [...] My childish memories hold the sound of the war whoop and I see pictures of painted Indians” (Sampler 7). As Wilder’s childhood coincided with one of the last great thrusts of westward expansion in the United States, she spent many years either in virtual isolation or in the beginning stages of community development: “There was no radio to amuse us then, no moving pictures to go see [...] Our little family must be self sufficient for its own entertainment as well as its livelihood and there was no lack of either [...] We had a busy happy childhood, but of it all Sister Mary and I loved Pa’s stories best” (Sampler 216-217). “Pa’s stories,” retold in both “Pioneer Girl” and the “Little House” series (particularly within the structure of Little House in the Big Woods), are always auto/biographic in nature. Ranging in time from the youth of Wilder’s grandparents to the then-present, the stories manage to entertain and prescribe proper moral behavior as they reveal information about familial relationships. Thus, Wilder grew up in an environment where she was constantly surrounded by her family, and continually fascinated by stories that solidified their identity.

As the identity of her family (and her role in its structure) figures largely in her formative years, it is hardly surprising that Wilder focuses a large chunk of her life’s work re-performing Pa’s role of familial storyteller. In writing about her early life in snippets of her column in the Missouri Ruralist, “Pioneer Girl,” and the narratives of the “Little House” series, Wilder recreates and embodies both the context of her childhood and the process of learning familial and
self-identity through storytelling. In this chapter, I investigate Wilder’s process of growth and maturation through a close reading of the narrative in “Pioneer Girl.”

Laura Ingalls Wilder’s “Pioneer Girl” documents Wilder’s life from her earliest recollections at two or three years old, through eighteen years of age. Throughout the one hundred, single-spaced pages,15 she does not detail every experience of her life, but rather concentrates on those specific instances and relationships the author deems significant in shaping her life. While there is no distinctive “plotline” or hierarchy of events, a major theme is present throughout of Wilder preparing for her role as a functioning adult within society. In focusing on the stories told within her text, I analyze Laura’s gendered identity starting with her earliest descriptions of self, and moving through her childhood, teenage years, courtship and marriage. Within this chronology, I explore her performances of masculinity and femininity, as well as her reflection and refraction of traditional gendered behavior of the later 1800s. Using the following example of performed femininity as a the basis for analysis within this chapter, I thus outline and highlight Laura’s process of becoming and embodying a “young lady.”

While “Pioneer Girl” concludes on the day of Wilder’s marriage and her first evening in her new home – signifying her status as independent adult - the body of the piece concentrates on the journey towards reaching this moment. In choosing the end of childhood / beginning of adulthood as the endpoint of her work, she demonstrates a keen awareness of the transformative performances which shape her identity. Significantly, Wilder applies that same consciousness to other critical points in her life. Approximately halfway through the personal narrative that tracks her process of becoming, Wilder poignantly describes the exact moment she begins to transition

15 This is again representative of my translation of “Pioneer Girl.” In Wilder’s hand-written work, completed on multiple orange writing tablets, the page numbers approach three times that much.
into womanhood. While helping her mother cook food for a railroad company encampment she reflects,

Ma and I had been so hurried with the work cooking for extra men as the camp broke up, that we had no time for sewing and alas my dresses wore out until I had no change. Mary had been wearing long dresses and was taller than I, but as she had an extra dress, I put it on. Then I pinned up my hair, because my long braids hanging got in my way and hindered the work. So there I was a young lady with long dresses and hair done up. (61)

Fig. 4: Wilder becomes a “young lady.”

On the surface, Wilder illustrates an understanding that to be a “young lady” corresponds to a particular hairstyle and code of dress. The presence of pinned braids and a dress hem that reaches the ankles would alter her public persona and immediately expose and signify Wilder’s passage towards adulthood. Yet, it is important to note that the original decision to pin up the hair is in direct correlation with Wilder’s ability to adequately fulfill her duties as a contributing
member of the domestic realm. As the length of Wilder’s braids interrupts the quality and efficiency of cooking, dishwashing, and cleaning, she adjusts her bodily self in accordance with her desired performance. Susan Bordo articulates the relationship between the body and the culture in which it operates as symbiotic: “the body - what we eat, how we dress, the daily rituals through which we attend to the body - is a medium of culture” (165). Thus, as Wilder’s body is commandeered by the regulations of presentational social decorum, so, too, is the society dependent upon her to compose and embody the codes of its existence.

It is important to also note that the process of becoming a “young lady” is precipitated by the norms for social behaviors. Wilder does not detail any kind of physical, pubescent changes or sexual maturation; in place of simple chronological age, she measures her abilities to assist her mother as the primary markers for growth. In effect, to be a woman is not an inherent state of being. Instead, to be a woman is to perform: to adhere to a specific uniform, to cook for crowds of people, to effectively manage a kitchen and dining area, to have the capability to sew, to aid other women in a community setting, and to conduct oneself without complaint. While the behaviors described are traditionally feminine within a patriarchal culture, the fact remains that Wilder’s sex would not cease to exist were she to take off her dress, refuse to serve the men at the encampment, and go take a solitary walk. It is merely the performative expression of her gender that is altered, thus enacting a corporeal discourse that is recognized by the surrounding culture. Judith Butler extends this idea by noting that, since a culture defines itself through processes of signification, the only bodies of social importance are those constituted discursively. She asserts that the concept of one’s sex is “part of a regulatory practice that produces the body it governs […] In other words, ‘sex’ is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time” (Bodies 282). While Butler acknowledges that the terms “sex” and “gender” do not mean
the same thing, she notes that a discussion of their innate and/or constructed nature is ultimately moot, due to the fact that the language which describes both is socially constructed and arbitrary. Thus, as Butler occasionally refers to “sex” as performative (as in the above quote), I am going to designate sex as referencing a body with normative physical and biological characteristics (i.e. genitalia), and gender as the performance of its identity. Nonetheless, we both hold that notions of gender are not essentialist, fixed states of being, but rather a fluid set of performed conventions.

Furthermore, Wilder’s competence in recognizing and performing those normative behaviors attributed to becoming a young woman is not something that spontaneously appeared; instead, it was learned over time. On a somewhat obvious level, Wilder learned the mechanics of cooking, cleaning, and other domestic activities first from watching – and then participating with – her mother, Caroline (examples of which are described in greater detail later in the chapter). Yet, she also has a lifelong model in her sister, Mary. Born two years before Laura, Mary is first taught by Ma, and, in turn, repeats those behaviors for Laura’s benefit, such as becoming an exemplar of a young woman who wears long, clean, dresses, which are properly cared for as to retain their impeccable quality. Thus, Wilder’s conception of what a woman looks like and the way she acts is strengthened and solidified by the multiple memories and continued current actions of those around her; accordingly, her performance of womanhood emulates those arbitrary representative characteristics she has observed multiple times. Marvin Carlson further explains the relationship between memory, repetition, and performance; such as it is expressed in the traditional theatre:

All theatre […] is as a cultural activity deeply involved with memory and haunted by repetition. Moreover, as an ongoing social institution it almost invariably
reinforces this involvement and haunting by bringing together on repeated occasions and in the same spaces the same bodies (onstage and in the audience) and the same physical material. (Haunted Stage 11)

Although Carlson alludes to actors and stages (none of which appear within the text of “Pioneer Girl”), his statement on the interconnectedness of memory and repeated behavior can transfer to the performance of identity. In particular, the idea of being “haunted” by traces of prior figures and events may figure into Wilder’s blind adherence to the role of traditional young woman. As she puts on Mary’s dress, she is haunted by the literal and figurative sign of her sister’s emblem of good behavior. The dress, therefore, is a constant physical reminder of Wilder’s status as a young woman, as well as her “duty” to re-perform the behaviors of womanhood previously modeled by her sister and mother.

Finally, as this interlude of feminine transformation is absent from the “Little House” series, the first-person description is particularly relevant in determining how Wilder viewed her burgeoning participation into womanhood and woman’s work. As the ritualistic changing of her hair and dress is precipitated by a pace so rushed it literally wears her dress out, the moments of change seem preciously candid. As Wilder pauses her activity to view and describe herself for the first time as a young woman, she reveals an awareness of her new embodied form, as well as the perception of her new identity by others. Laura Mulvey notes, “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female […] women are simultaneously looked at and displayed” (272). Wilder’s word choice of “young lady” and “hair done up” displays a consciousness of how she performs her feminine identity beneath an outsider’s gaze. Yet, as she refers to herself as that “young lady” she participates in the looking, and indeed is ambiguous in her reaction to this new representation of womanhood.
and femininity. We do not know if she is pleased or saddened, hopeful or resigned; perhaps, she is reserving judgment in favor of surveying and participating in multiple performances of young womanhood.

In this chapter, I investigate the performance of gender as a means of exploring Wilder’s feminine identity within the text of “Pioneer Girl.” Working from idea that identity is constituted through the repeated enactment of behaviors (a notion shared with performance theory and many feminist theories), I track the construction of “Laura.” Beginning with Wilder’s earliest memories and tracking them through her early adulthood in “Pioneer Girl,” I unpack her relationship to her father, mother, sisters, and husband; and her engagement with her masculinity, femininity and sense of self. What follows is a textual reading of Wilder within / as “Pioneer Girl.”

First Impressions: I / Laura

In its opening pages, “Pioneer Girl” immediately establishes itself as deviating from the structure of a traditional, masculine narrative. This is not an autobiography that begins with a description of the circumstances surrounding the subject’s birth, or the lives of her parents, and it is not a story that develops a plotline that builds with intensity towards a dramatic climax; instead, it explores a feminine arc which revolves around common themes, episodic accounts, and an evolving sense of self. As described in Chapter Two, the title of “Pioneer Girl” references the free spirit of the pioneering movement as well as the growth of children, both of which factor into the larger themes of Wilder’s work. In view of the fact that pioneerism and childhood are both concepts that resist immobility, it is perhaps not surprising that the opening
lines of “Pioneer Girl” deal not with the introduction of Wilder’s birth - or with any overt identification of self - but with the concept of movement:

(1) Once upon a time years and years ago, Pa stopped the horses and the wagon they were hauling away out on the prairie in Indian Territory. “Well, Caroline,” he said “here’s the place we’ve been looking for. Might as well camp.” So Pa and Ma got down from the wagon. Pa unhitched the horses and picketed them, tied them to long ropes fastened to wooded pegs driven in the ground, so they could eat the grass. Then he made the campfire out of bits of willow twigs from the creek nearby. Ma cooked supper over the fire and after we had eaten, sister Mary and I were put to bed in the wagon and Pa and Ma sat awhile by the fire. (1) Despite the fact that scholars generally recognize “Pioneer Girl” as an autobiographical account of Wilder’s life (as all the major dates, names, and many of the events described have been fact-checked), she does not include any details regarding her first few years of existence. There is no mention of her birth and first year in Wisconsin, as well as the material or social conditions that may have prompted the Ingalls family’s initial exodus westward; instead it is the actual movement of the family in a covered wagon. Indeed, there is no mention of where the family is coming from or exactly where they are, and time itself is located within the liminal, fairy-tale discourse of “Once Upon a Time.” The subject herself remains unnamed and undescribed; the only two points of interest are the family’s ability to move and adapt, and the speaker’s ability to observe and participate in the actions described.

The claim that the absence of early events and use of geographic identifiers is due to a lack of early memory is moot, given the fact that “Pioneer Girl” begins its narrative when Wilder is two, written over sixty years after the fact, and still includes the details of actions and spoken
dialogue that, to some degree, must be the product of poetic license. Instead, Wilder eschews a
traditional format of revealing information about life circumstances up front in favor of slowly
revealing pieces of the speaker’s identity. In effect, the reader is consciously forced to survey
the opening paragraphs for information on subject of the text: she (or he) is relatively young and
is with her family, which includes her mother, father, and sister; the family has been travelling
for an extended period of time, and they are strangers to the unpopulated land around them.
As the reader is continually developing her idea of who and what the subject and her
surroundings are, Wilder forces her audience to perform the same process of acclimation that the
speaker goes through in discerning the new space around her, and how she should behave within
it. In doing so, she calls attention to the notion that identity is an ongoing process connected to
the social world. As Annette Kolodny argues, there is a “growing emphasis in feminist literary
study on the fact of literature as a social institution, embedded not only within its own literary
traditions, but also within the particular physical and mental artifacts of the society from which it
comes” (“Dancing” 2149). Here, Wilder acknowledges the conditions of her life as rooted in
familial relationships and the spirit of pioneering; yet, in choosing to begin her auto-biographical
narrative outside the traditional structure, she simultaneously shows it is possible to act outside
the realm of the normative.

Instead of place, these introductory pages are devoted to what happens within space, and
contains snippets of what Wilder might refer to as a microcosm of pioneering life and flashes of
her lived experience: descriptions of traveling in a wagon, the building of a log house, the fear of
wolves at night in an unsettled terrain, the danger of the entire family becoming sick with
virtually no neighbors and the luck of a traveling doctor coming upon them, and the acquisition
of a cow that would provide the family with milk and perhaps the hope of butter and cheese. As
Wilder recalls the family leaving the “Indian Territory” on the tenth of her two hundred plus hand-written pages, it is perhaps partially due to practical motivations that “Pioneer Girl” focuses not on a location / production of the house. Yet, as she succinctly and pointedly observes, “The wagon was home, we had lived in it so long” (1), she acknowledges that it is possible to develop identity and take comfort in a space of movement. Thus, Wilder concentrates on the processes of pioneering and settlement.

Furthermore, there is nothing to indicate the family’s geographical location before they enter “Indian Territory,” nor does Wilder ever offer details about the exact whereabouts of the Ingalls family. A reader would either have to be already familiar with Wilder’s biography or the history of Native American colonization and/or land agreements of the mid-late eighteen hundreds to get a somewhat accurate sense of the Ingalls’ travels from western Wisconsin to southeast Kansas in late 1868. Although Kansas officially became a state in 1861 and the labeling of the land as “Indian Territory” was still common as of the Ingalls’ entry into the area in 1868, the reference to their location is vague at best.

In foregrounding personal experience and the journey of movement within space, instead of a detailed chronology of life from birth, Wilder’s identity is opened up, instead of pinned down. As the reader / audience is forced to guess such fundamental elements as the location and identity of the narrative voice, she is emancipated from any preconceived notions about the limitations of the author and her story. In her essay on the intersections of feminism and personal experience, Joan W. Scott discusses the implications of observing and articulating one’s subjective world:

Knowledge is gained through vision; vision is a direct, unmediated apprehension of a world of transparent objects. In this conceptualization of it, the visible is
privileged; writing is then put at its service. Seeing is the origin of knowing.

Writing is reproduction, transmission – the communication of knowledge gained through (visual, visceral) experience. (272)

For Scott, the very act of valuing personal life experience can have radical consequences; in acknowledging that all forms of bodily knowing lead to knowledge and the belief in knowing,\textsuperscript{16} anyone can become empowered.

As noted, Wilder does not identify herself at the extreme onset of the narrative, but introduces other members of the family first, encouraging the reader to build relationships with them that mirror Wilder’s subjective experience. In the first line of the text, Pa (Charles Ingalls) is identified as holding the primary authority in the family; it is he who is introduced first and foregrounds the family’s journey, guides the horses, and has the agency to decide where and when camp will be held, as well beginning the next stage of the pioneering process. Yet, while Wilder situates Pa as a traditional masculine figure in a patriarchal culture, his power is not absolute. In directing his first words towards Caroline Ingalls and noting that “this is the place we’ve been looking for,” he not only suggests she has played an active part in the looking and pioneering, but also that he values her presence and opinion \textsuperscript{16} (1, emphasis added). Moreover, as Pa acknowledges Caroline’s participation in the public process of selecting and locating a space to build a home and life, the notion that women’s work lies solely in the private realms of domesticity is troubled. Perhaps more importantly, Wilder has Pa refer to Caroline by her first name, which signals that she is viewed as an individual, and not simply a signifier of “wifeliness” or motherhood. This suggests Wilder also viewed Caroline Ingalls as having some

\textsuperscript{16} While Scott uses the words \textit{vision} and \textit{seeing}, I believe she is speaking symbolically of the multiple ways one can view and “know” her environment. The descriptive inclusion of \textit{visceral} contributes to the idea of the world as a multi-sensory experience.
degree of autonomy within the familial structure, and that her working contribution was considered both integral to and perhaps on an equal plane with Pa’s.

It is only after the evening’s work is done that Wilder introduces herself as she is put to bed in the wagon with her sister, noting that she does not immediately fall asleep as directed: “I lay and looked through the opening in the wagon cover at the campfire and Pa and Ma sitting there. It was lonesome and so still with the stars shining down on the great, flat land where no one lived” (1, emphasis added). Curiously, it is only when Wilder is unobserved and unattended that she feels free to draw attention to her/self; as she surveys her surroundings, she is able to produce meaning regarding both the world around her and herself. Here, her sense of identity is directly correlated with her point of view. Interestingly, the ability to directly look and experience the physical world is of such-self importance to Wilder, that it becomes a point of contention in the “Little House” series. In multiple books in the published series, Wilder continually suffers her mother’s admonitions to keep her sunbonnet so she retains her fair complexion; yet, she stubbornly refuses to do so, as the bonnet’s wide, long brim severely restricts her line of sight and ability to conceive perspective. In *Little House on the Prairie*, Wilder reflects, “Laura’s sunbonnet hung down her back. She pulled it up by its strings, and its sides came past her cheeks. When her sunbonnet was on she could see only what was in front of her, and that was why she was always pushing it back and letting it hang by its strings tied around her throat” (123). Thus, as Wilder continually resists obstructions to her literal viewpoint, it is also clear that she values agency in her ability to take in and process the world around her.

17 In fact, “Ma” has to reproach Wilder's behavior so many times that it becomes part of the family lore even after she has outgrown such necessary childhood supervisions. In *These Happy Golden Years*, it becomes a joke as sister Grace (who is around five years old at the time), yells for Laura to remember her sunbonnet on the day of her wedding as she leaves to move into her new home with Almanzo Wilder.
Perhaps the most notable difference between the published “Little House” series and “Pioneer Girl” is the point of view of the narrative; for while the former utilizes a third-person, omniscient format (Laura), the later employs the first-person (I). In a letter to Wilder discussing the work that was destined to become *Little House in the Big Woods*, Rose Wilder Lane suggests that third-person is the style preferred (or even necessitated) within the juvenile fiction community. Revealing her editorial background and role in her mother’s work, she advises, “if you find it easier to write in the first person, write that way. I will change it into the third person later.” Later on she suggests that the format of the book take the shape of a calendar year, with instructions to “take the book from winter through spring, summer, autumn, and end with the first snow of next winter” (qtd. In Wadsworth 103). While Lane’s letter implies she claims (at least partial) agency in the construction and style of Wilder’s published work, she had no such involvement with the construction of “Pioneer Girl,” suggesting that the content and structure – while not in line with traditional, “industry” standards – are, nonetheless, the products of Wilder’s original intent.

Moreover, while Pa, Ma, and Mary are given specific identifiers on the first page of Wilder’s work (the rest of her siblings also receive their subsequent names upon their introduction to the text), she does not offer the reader / audience her own until much later in the narrative. While the reader is not provided with the personal name or surname (Charles Ingalls) of her father, “Pa,” is still identified both by his relationship to his wife and children, and in the traditional masculine, gendered activities of building a home, protecting the family, and providing for them. Similarly, “Caroline / Ma” is a dutiful wife and mother who keeps house and cooks the family meals, and participates in decision-making; even Mary is given the primary signifier of “sister.” In consequence, as the Ingalls family is identified by familial relationships
and traditionally gendered performances, the reader is also likely to view them through these (perhaps constricting) lenses.

Yet, as Wilder slowly builds and allows access to her maturing identity, she answers Cixous’s call: “Woman must put herself into the text - as into the world and into history - by her own movement” (2039). The reader’s first introduction to the narrative persona is a rather non-descript “I,” as there are no descriptions of corporeality or overt familial relations, as demonstrated with Mary and “Baby Carrie” (emphasis mine). Instead, the reader first forms a picture of who “Pioneer Girl” is through the performance of her experiences and her viewpoint. While the reader may not have had the personal pioneering involvement that Wilder went through in the 1870s, she still can identity with feelings, such as the fear of wolves, the awesomeness of the prairie, the excitement over the family acquiring a cow, and frustrated helpless when Native Americans arrive unannounced at the house and demand food. This malleable identity allows the reader to empathize and formulate their own vision of “I’s” embodiment.

With the revelation that “I” is also “Laura,” Wilder continues the process of naming and constructing herself on both literal and symbolic levels. As Foucault observes, “discourse that possesses an author’s name is not to be immediately consumed and forgotten; neither is it accorded the momentary attention given to ordinary, fleeting words. Rather, its status and its manner of reception are regulated by the culture in which it circulates” (1627). This reveals a heightened sense of agency in constructing identity; as Wilder can claim grounding in both author and reader - both “Laura” and “I” simultaneously - she is an exemplar of Schechner’s performance modicum of both “not me” and “not not me.”
Masculine Identification: Towards the Tomboy

In her work *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler challenges the view that to be part of the category of “women,” one must accept essentialist notions of gender. She questions the boundaries of femininity, asking “If there is a region of the ‘specifically feminine,’ one that is both differentiated from the masculine as such and recognizable in its difference by an unmarked and, hence, presumed universality of ‘women’?” (7). For Butler, the answer is a definitive “no;” as such, she resists viewing masculinity and femininity as a binary, choosing instead to investigate those social and political conditions which constitute a fluid, gendered, identity. In the following sections, I utilize Butler’s theory of the instability of gender to unpack Wilder’s performances of her masculinity and femininity. As the last chapter discusses the rigidity of gender roles in the late 1800’s, I use the terms “masculinity” and “femininity” as a baseline in reference to those socially-prescribed behaviors in existence at the time. While there are certainly many instances where Wilder performs femininity as defined by patriarchy, I also show her refraction of andocentric society, thus troubling the two categories as discrete.

In a letter dated August 6, 1936, Laura Ingalls Wilder wrote to her daughter, Rose Wilder Lane, to discuss the editing process on the manuscript that was to become *On the Banks of Plum Creek*. In the following section, she gives Lane permission to co-create dialogue for both Pa and Ma, but creates guidelines for language based on what she views as “lady-like” and “un-lady-like” behavior. She asserts:

(47) Don’t give Pa or Ma any dialect. I never heard Pa swear; never anything stronger than “Gosh all hemlock, well I’ll be darned, or “Great Jehoshaphat.” But of course a Lady like Ma would never use such expressions. Her language was rather precise and a great deal better language than I have ever used. She was a
school teacher and well educated for her time and place, rather above Pa socially. Mary and Carrie were like her. Grace and I were more like Pa using an expletive now and then as we grew older and inclined to laugh and joke and sing. On Page 12 – you have Ma say “she vowed she didn’t believe those young ones were ever going to sleep.” Never in the world [ - ] what she would have said and did many times was “Charles I don’t believe those children will ever go to sleep. Neither of them ever did or would have thought of calling us “young ones” we were always children and “I vow” was something Ma never would have said, being a lady and school teacher. (14)

Here, Wilder clearly distinguishes between feminine and masculine language: the latter is conducive to joking, loudness, and allows for expletives to occasionally surface in one’s vocabulary, while the former category is typified by “precise-ness,” modesty, and reflects a “cultured” disposition. Not surprisingly, both Ma and Pa’s language and subsequent behavior reflect these distinctions to the point that Wilder dictates precise word choices for both, even poetically emphasizing Ma’s femininity by linking her with the capitalized noun of “Lady.” Despite these gendered divisions, it is important to note that the four female Ingalls children do not automatically adhere to the rules of feminine language implied through their sex. While Mary and Carrie follow Ma’s example, Grace and Laura not only emulate Pa in their use of expletives, but further the behavior towards a masculine performance in their “inclin[ation] to laugh and joke and sing.” As the “girls” participate in masculine language and performance, they model Butler’s hypothesis that there are a multiplicity of ways to embody both masculinity and femininity in the constitution of the self. Yet, the slipperiness of gender is found not only in Wilder’s letters, but within her texts in the construction of “Laura” as well. The following
examples illustrate Wilder coming to terms with (her) masculinity alongside a growing consciousness of proper gendered behavior. While she is permitted to engage in masculine play at an early age, her maturation is accompanied by subtler ways of engaging and identifying with her father, followed by a vicarious performance of masculinity through her writing as a man.

As the title of “Pioneer Girl” suggests, Laura Ingalls Wilder’s identity is intricately bound to performances of gender. In placing the concept of her girlhood as the driving thematic force behind her manuscript, she consciously acknowledges that the performance of femininity defines who she is and who she will become. Beginning at the forefront of her memory in 1869/1870, she traces those early familial experiences that influenced her life and sense of self. While there is no overt criticism of gender roles (nor should she be held accountable for knowledge of contemporary theories and its accompanying vocabulary), she, nonetheless, troubles the theory that one’s sense of masculinity or femininity is innately known. Near the beginning of “Pioneer Girl,” when Wilder is approaching three or four years old, she describes a favorite childhood play space of both herself and her sister, Mary. A particularly large rock was frequented by the pair in order to engage in their most-beloved game; she recalls, “It was so steep we could not climb straight up but had to go sideways up it. We used to play it was our fort and that Indians were hiding in the willows along the creek” (22). Left to their own devices, Laura and Mary demonstrate that female children may express themselves and find pleasure in such strenuous physical activity as climbing, and that they can participate in the romanticized, masculine performance of pioneering, battle, and “taming” of the unknown west and its inhabitants.

Additionally, approximately eighty years prior to the childhood play of Laura and Mary, Mary Wollstonecraft critiqued the notion that women are inherently inferior to men, beginning at birth. In her 1792 work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* she notes, “girls and boys, in
short, would play harmlessly together, if the distinction of sex was not inculcated long before nature makes any difference” (81). In discerning that developing children have both the desire and capability of playing together on an equal plane if left to their own devices, Wollstonecraft suggests that society enforces a sexual binary that doesn’t biologically exist. In describing her early life, Wilder also traces this phenomenon via her lived experience.

As Wilder describes her indulgences in unsupervised masculine play as a small child, she concentrates on nothing more than the pleasure of the activity. Yet, by the time she enters the social arena of school, she demonstrates an awareness of a gendered division of socially acceptable behavior. In “Pioneer Girl,” she proclaims,

Being, as sister Mary said, a tomboy, I led the girls into the boys games […] Only one boy in the school could run faster than me and not always he could do it. When the boys saw how well we could play in an hour of triumph they took us into their baseball game and we played that the rest of the summer, much to the scandal of [the] big girls, being ladies. (39)

Here, Wilder clearly acknowledges a separation of what “proper” games are for boys and girls, and yet also notes that, not only is she able to participate in those games, but, at times, she is better than all than the boys at “boys” games; i.e., she is excels at performing masculinity in spite of her sex. It is also noted that she mentions her behavior as being a “scandal” to those “ladies” (including her sister) that represent the epitome of traditional femininity, and yet she considers it a kind of “triumph.” Despite the fact that she is knowingly bending social norms, she does not feel personal shame or inadequacy; instead, her attitude of pride and flirtation with being a girl in a boy’s world appears to create a sense of empowerment.

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18 Within “Pioneer Girl,” the above quote situates Wilder at around five years old.
Yet, as Wilder seems to take pride in separating herself from the identity of a “lady,” she later show that such a transition is imminent in order to function within the hierarchical structures of society. When she attempts to play “boy” games a few years later, the latter experience is quite different from the previous one:

Mary objected to my playing such rough games outdoors with the boys, but she could not keep me in and once when she took both hands full of my loose, long hair and tried to hold me. I stiffened my neck and dragged her to the door where she caught some of the snowballs herself before she let me go. Then she told Ma about it and Ma said I was too large a girl to play that way anymore. I would soon be thirteen and must be more of a lady. After that I stayed with the big girls and the very little ones in the house. The other girls of any crowd would not go because I didn’t and soon the boys had all the outdoor fun to themselves except on (133) the way to and from school. When Genevieve got her face washed in the snow she would cry helplessly but I was busy giving as good as I got. (44)

Here, Wilder’s behavior, in conjunction with age, is dangerous enough to be regulated by an authority figure; as Ma mollifies her in noting that she will soon become a lady, Wilder acquiesces to the feminine, domestic realm. As Judith Halberstam expresses in her book, *Female Masculinity*, “Tomboyism is punished, however, when it appears to be the sign of extreme male identification (taking a boy’s name or refusing girl clothing of any type) and when it threatens to extend beyond childhood and into adolescence” (6). As Wilder has “matured,” the insinuation is that her chronological age necessitates a change in social behavior to successfully integrate with culture as a young adult; thus, she has no choice but to “become” a lady. As “very little ones”
(described elsewhere as babies/toddlers of either sex) are the only others confined to the house, she reveals an attitude that ladylike behavior and its ensuing responsibility are akin to punishment. As she clearly marks the territory of lady as the “house” and that of the boys’ as “outdoors,” her small defiance in exacerbating a last tomboyish/masculine act in the snow during walks to school feels like a kind of battle cry from one who knows she is losing some of her freedoms. Wilder is no longer “allowed” to play at and defend her fort; instead, she will be primed for the identity of lady / young women, and the rigorous social performances that are expected of it.

While Wilder only infrequently indulges in her seemingly masculine tendencies towards outdoor/public play and her aggressive physicality, she is, interestingly, allowed to assist her father in his work as farmer, hunter, and provider. Early on in “Pioneer Girl,” Wilder gives an extremely lengthy description of her father’s process of making bullets and loading his rifle. The account is repeated practically verbatim in *Little House in the Big Woods*, and I include it here in its entirety due to the rich detail and obvious attention Wilder invests in both her original observations and in its re-telling:

He would melt bits of lead in a large spoon over the coals of fire. While it was hot as hot he would pour it through a little hole into the bullet molds and after a minute he would open the molds and drop out a bright, shiny new bullet onto the hearth. When he had made enough he would let them cool, then trim off with his jackknife, the little lump where he had (26) poured the lead into the mold. When they were all finished he would put them in his bullet pouch. The pouch was a bag made of buckskin. It was fun for us to watch Pa load his gun. He would pour some powder down into the barrel from his powder horn. Then he would pull the
ramrod from its place at the side of the gun, drop it into the barrel and pound the powder down hard. Next he would take a little patch of greased cloth from the small tin box he carried them in, lay it over the mouth of the gun barrel put the bullet on it and with the ramrod push it down the gun barrel pounding it hard against the patch and the powder. He would put the ramrod back in its place on the gun, then take his box of gun caps from his pocket, take one out, raise the hammer of the gun, slip the little bright cap over the pin that was under the hammer and let the hammer down over it carefully. When the hammer went down hard as it did when Pa raised it, cocking the gun, and then pulled the trigger with his finger, the gun would go off and kill anything that was (27) in front of it. When the gun was at home, it hung over the door. When Pa went hunting, he carried his bullet pouch full of bullets, his patches and box of caps in his pockets. The horn filled with powder and a small hatchet were hung at his waist and he carried his gun all loaded on his shoulder. Every time he shot at anything he had to stop and load his gun before he could shoot again. (9)
He would melt bits of lead in a large spoon over the coals of fire. While it was hot as hot he would pour it through a little hole into the bullet molds and after a minute he would open the molds and drop out a bright, shiny new bullet onto the hearth. When he had made enough, he would let them cool, then trim off with his jackknife the little bump or cress he had
It was fun for us to watch him load his gun. He would pour some powder down into the barrel from his powder horn. Then he would pull the ramrod from its place at the side of the gun, drop it into the barrel and pound the powder down hard. Next he would take a little patch of greased cloth from the small tin box he carried them in, lay it over the mouth of the gun barrel and put the patch on it. Then he would take the ramrod, push it down the gun barrel, pounding it hard against the patch and the powder. He would put the ramrod back in its place on the gun, then take his box of gun caps from his pocket, take one out, raise the hammer of the gun, slip the little bright cap over the pin that was under the hammer and let the hammer down over it carefully. When the hammer went down hard as it did when he raised it, cocking the gun, and then pulled the trigger with his finger, the gun would go off and kill anything that was
Perhaps the most immediately obvious and accessible phallic symbol, the loaded gun signifies the epitome of patriarchy. Because Wilder is female, she is literally and figuratively unequipped to handle the gun; however, while she is forbidden to ever handle the weapon, she is allowed to watch Pa and subsequently assists him as he makes bullets from a mold. This suggests that there are gradations in what is considered masculine performance; as Wilder is not allowed to wield its primary symbol, she may still participate in the knowledge of its making. Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick echoes this in her assertion that masculinity and femininity are “Orthogonal: that is, instead of being at opposite poles of the same axis, they are actually in different, perpendicular dimensions, and are independently variable” (15-16). Thus, as Wilder is weaned off of overt gestures of masculine performativity and introduced to “ladylike” behavior, she is still able to engage in what are perceived as less disruptive masculine behaviors. As it
must have taken multiple viewings to attain such a level of comprehensive understanding of the
gun’s mechanisms, Wilder reveals a genuine interest and enjoyment (“it was fun”) in watching
the process. Since she expends so much energy on loading the gun, her parting remarks that the
same process must be repeated every time the gun is shot during hunting hint at the mix of
danger, bravery, and excitement that must be felt when Pa takes the penultimate masculine
emblem of protection, defense, and family sustenance out onto the prairies.

Furthermore, despite the fact that Laura never physically accompanies Pa on any hunting
excursions, she vicariously performs his experience. In 1937, Wilder revealed to an audience her
feelings regarding Pa’s stories: “We never forgot them and I have always felt that they were too
good to be altogether lost” (LORE 7). Certainly, this is evident throughout the text of “Pioneer
Girl;” while there are no tangents regarding Ma’s earlier life or excursions independent from the
family (perhaps the latter is due to the fact that she is almost always in direct, physical contact
with her children or the Ingalls family home), there are many that recall Pa as a separate entity
from the family. One such event is as follows:

One day when Pa was riding Patty, the pony, across the prairie he went down into
a little wash and found himself surrounded by a pack of wolves! The wolves
must have just eaten well for they paid no attention to him. […] Patty trembled
with fear, but Pa made her walk and the wolves carelessly ran on by. When they
had passed, Patty was shaking and actually sweating with fear and Pa wasn’t
much better: It took some nerve I’d say! (2)

Pa’s escape from a pack of around fifty large wolves is perhaps the most life threatening of all
the approximately half dozen excursions describing his adventures hunting and as a child. Also
described in the published series, they are characterized by Ann Romines as “shar[ing] themes of
traditional male initiation, teaching boys and men the conditions of physical and psychic survival in the natural world” (24). Despite the fact Laura is not literally meant to follow in Pa’s footsteps, he still shares with her the overriding lesson remaining calm and brave in the face of adversity. And yet, in its re-telling in “Pioneer Girl,” she clearly appropriates its emotional resonance as, throughout the text, she reserves exclamation points for rare moments of emphasis and intensity, and almost never interjects her narrative with individual, judgmental comments. As she declares her admiration for Pa’s nerve, she inhabits the adrenaline-filled world of male initiation that her father has also passed through.

Similarly, while Wilder is not allowed to roam through the woods as her father does when travelling and hunting, she may bend the rules of normative gendered behavior when it comes to less-valued performances of masculinity. The opening pages of The Long Winter present Laura, thirteen years old, pleading to help her father produce hay, as it is a two-person job and there are no opportunities for another male to assist in the task. While Pa is concerned the work may prove too difficult for her size and stature, he agrees with the logic and greets her request with enthusiasm and exclamation points. In contrast, Ma only grudgingly accepts the arrangement, as the text reveals that, “She did not like to see women working in the fields. Only foreigners did that. Ma and her girls were Americans, above doing men’s work” (4). Similarly, in the opening pages of Little Town on the Prairie, Pa inquires of Laura if she is interested in working in the town adjoining their claim: De Smet, South Dakota. Before she has

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19 As the focus of my dissertation is the construction of Laura Ingalls Wilder’s gendered identity, I choose not to expand on Ma Ingalls’ racial prejudices when they do not contribute significantly to my thesis. Yet, I would be remiss not to acknowledge that Ma has a pronounced bias for what she deems “civilized” white Americans. In particular, she exhibits racist attitudes towards Native Americans, which she is quite vocal about throughout the published series. Wilder, herself, views Native Americans significantly more openly and positively than her mother. Yet, as she expresses an honest curiosity and desire to understand the Other, her self-described feelings and observations are also tinged with a sense of exoticism and colonialism, making the endeavor to deconstruct the complexity of her attitudes a time-consuming experience that I will perhaps undertake at a later date. See Ann Romines’ Constructing the Little House: Gender, Culture, and Laura Ingalls Wilder (1997) for further discussion on this topic. Chapter two, “‘Indians in the House:’ A Narrative of Acculturation,” is specifically nuanced.
a chance to answer, Ma immediately interjects: “‘A job? For a girl? In town?’ Ma said. ‘Why, what kind of a job-’ Then she said, ‘No, Charles, I won’t have Laura working out in a hotel among all kinds of strangers.’ ‘Who said such a thing?’ Pa demanded. ‘No girl of ours’ll do that, not while I’m alive and kicking.’ ‘Of course not,’ Ma apologized” (1-2). The job, Pa then reveals, is to accommodate a local dressmaker, Mrs. White, in hand sewing dress shirts for the season. Laura will not have to engage customers, and will be paid twenty-five cents per day. Ma then acquiesces and grants permission; although Laura, fourteen years old, does not desire to leave home on a daily basis, she takes the position because it will allow her to contribute to the family’s dream of sending Mary to the Iowa College for the Blind.

These short vignettes are indicative of traditional attitudes towards what constitutes acceptable feminine activity in the mid-late nineteenth century, namely, anything connected with domesticity. At their core, they both evince the accepted rigid gender binary that links the masculine with public life and the feminine with private; those that cross the social barrier are ostracized and removed to the outer fringes of an already-inferior class. Sue Ellen Case describes the strictures forced on women within centuries of historical documents and performances, affirming that,

Public life is privileged in these sources, while private life remains relatively invisible. The new feminist analyses prove that this division is gender specific: i.e., public life is the property of men, and women relegated to the invisible private sphere. As a result of the suppression of real women, the culture invented its own representation of the gender while suppressing the experiences, stories, feelings and fantasies of actual women. (6-7)
The first half of Case’s statement is visible in the differing reactions of each parent; faced with the prospect of Laura publicly presented as transgressor to social decorum and possibly opening herself to masculine gazing and consumption, Ma is undoubtedly more fearful and wary than Pa. The redemption in each scenario is brought about by Pa-as-Savior: Laura will not be unnecessarily exposed as Pa will protect her during haymaking and shield her from prying eyes as he accompanies her to and from work each day. While Ma’s outrage and indignation perhaps stem from her frustration and inability to act, Pa’s only surfaces when his authority and power are called into question.

The latter half of Case’s affirmation is perhaps best exemplified not in any books from the published series, but rather within the simplified biographical information documented in “Pioneer Girl.” As noted previously, the highest point of emotional intensity occurs when Pa asserts that his death is the only thing capable of manifesting a situation where Laura’s position of approved traditional femininity is threatened. So dramatic is his response that it provokes Ma’s immediate apology for indirectly inferring his inability to properly perform the strong and protective aspects of masculine behavior. Yet, in actuality, during the fall of 1876, the Ingalls family left Minnesota because “One of the friends in town had traded for a hotel (the Masters Hotel) in Burr Oak, Iowa, and was going there late in the fall. He wanted Pa and Ma to go and be partners with them and it was so decided” (“Pioneer Girl” 31). During the year-long venture (during which time she was nine and ten years old), Wilder documents participating in kitchen duties, waiting on the table, babysitting children in the hotel, and running solitary errands. While

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20 Burr Oak, Iowa, is a small, unincorporated community in the north easternmost corner of the state, close to the Minnesota border. Although there are no current population statistics, the surrounding Winneshiek County is home to 2,000 people according to the 2000 census. The Masters Hotel in Burr Oak, Iowa, is listed in the National Register of Historic Places and is preserved as a museum. The tour, which I personally experienced in the summer of 2008, includes archival relics, historic documents, and anecdotal lore (the bullet holes described are still visible) regarding the time the Ingalls family lived in Burr Oak and worked at the hotel.
these activities appear to run contrary to Pa and Ma’s prior protestations, the following
description more concretely echoes those qualities and situations best avoided by proper young
women. Although Wilder remembers the hotel as “pretty,” she distinctly notes the presence of
“several bullet holes made by the son of the man who had sold us the hotel, when he shot at his
wife, as she ran from him through the door. He had been drunk! […] Pa and Ma didn’t like the
saloon next door either and we were a little afraid of the men who were always hanging around
its door” (32). The close proximity to a saloon, the potential to witness and experience reckless
and dangerous drunken behavior, and remaining in close living conditions with strangers that
also must be publicly served are all occurrences notably absent from the published series.21
Thus, while the idealized, published Laura never experiences such an exposure, the Laura of
“Pioneer Girl” is one of Case’s “actual women:” one whose family has had to exchange the
rigidity of its values for greater financial stability, one who is witnesses to some unsavory
characteristics of others, and one who is altered by her public work at a young age. There is an
unmasking of the artifice embedded in the gendered divide of public and private life, as the truth
of maintaining a totally innocent, delicate, domesticated feminine life proves to unrealistic.

Instead, “Pioneer Girl” offers femininity a liminal space that transgresses its traditional
boundaries. It is crucial to note that, even in the instances quoted above from the published
series, Wilder does not adhere to social decorum. She is the one who instigates her work in the
field, which turns out to be extremely labor intensive and physically demanding. Similarly,
while Laura’s job in town requires her to sew in a chair in a window front, she eventually
becomes so curious about her surroundings that she gives detailed reports of what she observes.

21 The time period surrounding the Ingalls’ stay in Burr Oak is entirely absent from and never mentioned in the
published series. While the reasons for this omission are not definitively known (I will be addressing this elsewhere
in this dissertation), it is made clear that Pa and Ma disapprove of alcohol consumption and are non-violent. They
take great pains for their children to conduct themselves with proper decorum at all times and to remain innocent of
what they deem crass, rough behavior, as exemplified in the above quotes.
Upon revealing the only story within the series about the harmless antics of a drunken man, she is at first surprised that her family looks upon the situation with solemnity and disgust. But as Ma proclaims, “It’s a crying shame that such things can happen before Laura’s very eyes,” she feels silent relief when noticing that Pa is laughing with her and gives her a knowing glance (55). In her desire to interact with and understand the public realms her father inhabits, she subtly subverts the “natural” claim of femininity. Judith Halberstam discusses masculine desires and activities performed by women, stating, “female masculinities are framed as the rejected scraps of dominant masculinity in order that masculinity may appear to be the real thing. But what we understand as heroic masculinity has been produced by and across both male and female bodies” (1-2). Thus, it is possible to discern aspects of Wilder’s identity within moments of her performed masculinity.

While Wilder’s masculinity is socially-accepted as long as it doesn’t enter the realm of Halberstam’s “dominant” performance, she is able to experience masculinity in a more overt, poetic form through the connection of her narrative in “Pioneer Girl,” with the gendered discourse present in her published book, Farmer Boy. Around one third of the way into the text of “Pioneer Girl,” she describes an incident that occurred while she was a student in a one-room schoolhouse. There are a small group of misbehaving young men in their mid twenties that only frequent school during the winter session, as their sole aim is to beat the teacher to the point of retirement and to break up the school, which they have done on multiple past occasions. This year presents their teacher, Mr. Reed, as younger than the boys and of slight build, and so his safety is called into question. Wilder then recounts the surprise that awaits the boys on the day their mischief is scheduled to occur:
They oldest and biggest one, named Mose, was the worse of the lot. Mr. Reed sat in this chair by his desk with his ruler in one hand, idly spitting it against the other. It was (96) a large, flat very strong ruler he had just made. Mose was the last one in and before he sat down Mr. Reed told him to come to him […] Mr. Reed sat still and just as Mose stood in front of him, reached up with his left hand, grabbed Mose by the collar and jerked, tripping him with his foot at the same time and layed him neatly across his knees, with one leg across Mose’s legs. It all happened so quickly that Mose was so surprised that, before he knew what had happened, he lay there like a bad boy and was being soundly spanked with the flat, strong ruler […] he never came back to school again. (33)

Like many others, this anecdote does reappear in the published series. Yet, instead of claiming its factual location within a description of Wilder’s earlier school days, it instead occupies the pages of the only book in which Laura – or any of the Ingalls family – fails to appear: Farmer Boy. Within the published narrative, it is Almanzo Wilder who first experiences agonized trepidation, then relief that his teacher is unharmed and the disruptive gang of older boys has retreated from the premises. The only changes to the story are the names of the protagonist and antagonist (here Mr. Corse and Big Bill Ritchie), and the exchange of a hard ruler for an ox whip. This story takes place in Malone, New York, when Almanzo is eight years old, approximately 1865/6. At the time, the historical Ma, Pa, and Mary Ingalls are settled in the Big Woods near Pepin, Wisconsin; Laura was not present, as she was not born until over one year later.

While “Pioneer Girl” gives no indication as to the inspiration for Mr. Reed’s surprise punishment, Farmer Boy discloses that it is Almanzo’s father, James Wilder, who suggests the
plan of action for the impending fight. This revelation occurs at the Wilder family dinner table, a scenario in which Mr. Corse is a guest. As Mr. Wilder and Mr. Corse discuss the successful thwarting of Big Bill Ritchie’s attempt to “break up” the school, Mr. Corse mentions that he owes his triumph to Mr. Wilder’s loaning of his blacksnake whip. Almanzo is so taken with this knowledge that he is physically affected: “Almanzo stopped eating. He sat and looked at Father. It was Father’s blacksnake whip that had bested Big Bill Ritchie. Almanzo was sure that Father was the smartest man in the world, as well as the biggest and strongest” (47). While it is logical for Almanzo to conclude that the initial idea for “besting” Ritchie and maintaining the school requires creativity and intelligence, it is noteworthy that he automatically links those traits to positive markers of masculinity: being “the biggest and strongest” man.

This detailed incident is the only one within “Pioneer Girl” whose narrator switches genders and contexts as it transcribes to the published series. Curiously, it does almost nothing to alter the plot / general themes of either overall narrative, and offers little to the character and qualities of either Laura or Almanzo that aren’t accomplished elsewhere. To my knowledge, this transference of the gendered persona has never been queried, acknowledged in any way, or addressed by Wilder. Perhaps, however, that is the point, as it is in small and ordinary, everyday performances that express identity. As Wilder subtly gives her story to Almanzo, there is a symbiotic exchange of each other’s masculinity and femininity. While Almanzo celebrates his father’s cleverness and foreknowledge of the situation as the epitome of masculinity, Wilder – in a way – produces those same qualities of omnipotence and creativity. For her status of “author” affords her primary power in knowing and controlling the outcome of her narrative, which is particularly displayed in the removed yet all-knowing third-person perspective of Farmer Boy. Thus, as it is ultimately Wilder who knows and exposes the fates of both Mr. Reed and Mr.
Corse, her identity as writer also performs and inverts what it means to be a big, smart, and strong “man.”

**Feminine Identification: Constructing the Young Lady**

As Wilder explores alternative performances of masculinity in the narratives of her written work, this section establishes that she is also actively preoccupied with differing characteristics and expressions of femininity. As early as 1919, during a time when the subjugation of woman was in the nation’s consciousness due to women’s suffrage, Wilder acknowledged that one’s activities and behavior correspond to social expectations of gender for women. In her *Missouri Ruralist* article, “Two Heads Are Better Than One,” she discusses those qualities that contain the identity of a “farming wife”:

> Besides being a helper in all these things with brains, and muscle if necessary, the farmer’s wife must know her own business, which includes the greatest variety of trades and occupations ever combined in one all-around person. Think of them! Cook, baker, seamstress, laundrywoman, nurse, chambermaid, and nurse girl.
> She is a poultry keeper, an expert in dairy work, a specialist in canning, preserving, and pickling, and besides all else, she must be the mother of the family and the smiling hostess. (201)

In this passage, Wilder directly states that the feminine identity of “farming wife” is dependent upon her performance of particular duties. While many of these involve actions and spaces that may be considered “traditionally” feminine and thereby oppressive – i.e. “cook, baker, seamstress, laundrywoman” – it is crucial to note that Wilder views her work as existing both within *and* without the domestic realm, and that she exhibits agency in performances she claims
as “her own.” While many of her duties do confine her to the privacy of the home, she does not
distinguish a hierarchy between those activities and the actions of farming and monitoring dairy
production (an activity mostly done by Pa in both “Pioneer Girl” and the “Little House” series).

Notably, she also describes working outdoors alongside her husband, and attributes to
herself those same characteristics of “brains” and “muscle” that are previously described as the
gatekeepers of masculinity. Thus, her embodiment is dependent upon and synchronous with her
daily behavior. Further cementing this relationship is the sense of ownership used in addressing
“her” work, and the fact that she also equates work with “business” suggests that she is both
capable and valued in her work. As she stresses that the work of farming women requires a
multiplicity of being that may be impressive within “one all-around person,” she again implies
that it takes skill and strength to be a housewife, and that such qualities are not confined to an
essentialist vision of sex. As such, she again exhibits the slipperiness of gender.

As Wilder wrote her original article at the age of fifty-two years, this section of the
chapter follows the origins of her beliefs regarding femininity and gender, as developed
primarily in the “Pioneer Girl” narrative excerpted above. Beginning with her earliest
recollections regarding “proper” performances of femininity, I track her growing awareness of
the possible restrictions of the domestic realm, her encounters with “idealized” feminine beauty,
the maturing female body and feminine dress, and the status of the female teacher. While I do
not necessarily believe that Wilder’s embodiment of femininity was overtly radical, I contend the
process of its making contains a heightened awareness of its constructed nature. Within these
typical contextual confinements for women in the nineteenth century, I uncover moments where
Wilder subverts patriarchal notions of femininity in favor of a complex, fluid sense of self.
As described in “Pioneer Girl,” Wilder notes her instruction in the feminine performance of housewifery from early childhood, mainly from her mother’s example. Beginning as early as age two/three years, she is conscious of her expectance to stay at home and help her mother with the housework while Pa hunts, works in the fields, or travels into a nearby town. Reflecting on life at age four years, she describes a typical routine: “When the work was done, Ma would cut out paper dolls for us and let us cook on the stove for our play house dinner. She taught Mary to knit, I was too little, she said, but sitting by watching I caught the trick first” (8). While Wilder may have been too young to participate in the actual cooking and household maintenance, she is witness to her mother’s actions, which in turn reinforces the training of those feminine activities in the choice of approved playtime activities. Moira Gatens echoes this notion as she highlights the need to consider historical past and context when theorizing the bodies of women. She asserts that, “to claim a history for the body involves taking seriously the ways in which diet, environment and the typical activities of a body may vary historically and create its capacities, its desires and its actual material form” (228). When Laura Ingalls Wilder was born, she inhabited a world which inherited very stringent rules on modesty and social decorum, as well as a distinct pride and trend towards self-efficiency. In order for Pa and Ma’s pioneering effort to be successful, each must understand their role within the family unit and work without complaint for its benefit. Thus, as soon as the Ingalls children are old enough, they are initiated into the domestic domain and “trained” to emulate their mother’s feminine model. Wilder’s eagerness in learning to knit and her proficiency in watching and participation suggests a willingness to perform properly; the fact that Laura is able to “catch” the “trick” of knitting before Mary is able to further alludes to the fact that it is a performed behavior to be learned.
Furthermore, as Wilder’s indoctrination to traditional feminine activity runs so smoothly, it is not surprising that it only takes a few more years for Wilder to successfully memorize and perform the daily acts of feminine activity, as if a cog in a well-oiled machine. She describes the routine of domesticity with a staccato-esque nuance:

Ma and I milked the cows […] carried the milk to the house and strained and set it. Then while Ma got breakfast, I took the skimmed milk out and fed the calves and changed their picked pins. After breakfast Pa went to his work and Ma and I and Carrie washed dishes, made beds, swept, scrubbed, washed or ironed or baked or churned as the task might be, usually following the old rule for housework, “Wash on Monday, iron on Tuesday, churn on Wednesday, clean on Friday and bake on Saturday,” with mending and sewing and knitting scattered along through the week mixed with the care of the hens and little chickens, working in the garden and feeding the pig. (82)

Within this passage in “Pioneer Girl,” Wilder’s detailing of women’s work serves to dispel the patriarchal stance that women are inferior, subordinate, and too weak to meaningfully contribute to society. As stated previously, Wilder was very vocal about her belief that the farming wife is an “equal” partner with the farming husband; she echoes that stance here in noting that the housework is done in conjunction with Pa performing “his” work duties, as both are necessary for the successful production of farming. Also acknowledged in the above quoted passage is Wilder’s assertion that women’s work is organized upon the principles of a time-honored practice within social history, and not the simple result of “naturally” prescribed behaviors. In fact, the days-of-the-week adage is so ingrained in Wilder at such a young age that, on her first trip to any town – which ends up being Pepin, Wisconsin – it is one of the first things she
notices. As she recounts in *Little House in the Big Woods*, “When she saw [Pepin], she could hardly breathe. She knew how Yankee Doodle felt, when he could not see the town because there were so many houses […] People were living in those houses.” Smoke rose up from the chimneys. Though it was not Monday, some woman had spread out a washing on the bushes and stumps by her house” (165-166). During a key “first” in Wilder’s young life (anywhere from age two to five in historical time), her breath is taken away not only by a wholly new sight of more than a couple buildings, but because there is a deviation from normative feminine behavior. What follows is a distinct growing awareness that there are a multitude of ways to engage and identify with society, as well as the notion that other realms may exist besides the isolated domesticity of her wooded home.

As the notion of proper feminine performance is continually developing within the various environmental contexts it occupies, it is not surprising that issues of corporeality become prominent with Wilder’s physical maturation. Early on in “Pioneer Girl,” she recounts one of her first experiences of feeling physically inadequate:

One day I wanted so much to be out under my tree for I had the most beautiful china cup with only one crack in it to add to my store of dishes, but Ma would not let me go […] Aunt Lottie was coming to visit and I must be made pretty for her to see. Mary was all ready with her golden hair hanging in long curls and her pretty blue dress so fresh and clean. I liked my dress better because it was red, but Ma pulled my hair dreadfully and it was brown instead of golden and no one noticed it as they did Mary’s. (15)

22 It should be noted that Laura does not, in fact, see that many buildings by today’s standards. The pages of the text describe a handful of houses in a man-made clearing by Lake Pepin. As I have seen this area and it has not changed drastically over time, I can report that it did not take many homes to take her breath away, which poignantly comments on her isolated existence up to that point.
Interestingly, the process of becoming “pretty” is precipitated by a refusal of permission to play outdoors, despite the fact of its domestic nature (Wilder earlier describes play with her “housekeeping things”). Instead, prettiness is a state of being that entails indoor seclusion, in part for the purposes of staying “fresh” and “clean,” as Mary properly models. Then, too, as Wilder is repeatedly chided throughout her teenage years for “ruining her complexion” with her tendency towards outdoor, public exposure to direct sunlight, Mary has no such issues. For Wilder, Mary’s blondness signifies the epitome of femininity and grace, her use of the oft repeated descriptive “golden” suggesting an equivocation with notions of quality and beauty, as well as whiteness and class. In *Little House in the Big Woods*, she describes her own hair as “only a dirt colored brown” and “ugly,” equating it with a lesser outdoor/public playground that pretty white girls are not supposed to claim allegiance with (162 & 168). Her feelings of bodily inferiority resurface later that evening: when Mary (exhibiting a rare flash of maliciousness) tells Wilder she has the prettier hair of the two, Wilder is so upset she slaps her sister, and is then punished for using physical violence.

A few pages later in her narrative, “Pioneer Girl,” Wilder describes a morning that was so full and busy that she did not have the time to engage in proper feminine dress. She explains, “there had been so much to do that morning getting started that our hair couldn’t get done, but Ma said nice girls would have their hair combed sometime in the morning anyway” (31). Here, Wilder expresses the learned distinction that, not only is femininity the strict expression of the subservient gender, but that there are, in fact, constructed hierarchies within the range of feminine performance. As Ma clearly values those young women who devote what attentions they can towards a well groomed, clean, tidy, and delicate appearance and character, her attitudes of feminine embodiment transfer to her daughter at well. It is perhaps purposeful, then, that
―Pioneer Girl‖ exhibits a handful of occasions through Wilder’s teenage years where she finds girls with blond hair and curls markedly beautiful.

As Wilder is grounded in specific notions of desired femininity, her own bodily performance is affected by those idealizations. Judith Butler locates this experience as a typical byproduct of constructed, hegemonic paradigms. She directs:

Consider that a sedimentation of gender norms produces the peculiar phenomenon of a “natural sex” or a “real woman” or any number of prevalent and compelling social fictions, and that this is a sedimentation that over time has produced a set of corporeal styles which, in reified form, appear as the natural configuration of bodies into sexes existing in a binary relation to one another. (Gender 178)

In tracking the journey of a performance from constructed behavior to its perceived epitomized embodiment of normativity, Butler simultaneously accounts for the relative ease with which patriarchal institutions are continually reproduced throughout history. It is the act of repeating an action that introduces it into the cultural consciousness, granting it authority and power.

When Wilder begins a new school session and encounters an old and “pretty” rival, Genevieve Masters, she upholds her learned values about what constitutes an aesthetically pleasing feminine body:

She was not changed in disposition since the Walnut Grove days but had grown tall and slim (260) with a beautiful complexion and was always dressed in pretty clothes. I was still a rolly, polly, half pint of cider and my clothes were nothing to speak of. There had been no money nor time for my clothes and thought they were good enough they were not attractive. It seemed some mornings as though I
simply could not face the crowd on the schoolgrounds and the palms of my hands would grow moist and sticky on my books. (86)

Wilder presents her body as containing decidedly less beauty – and, by extension, less worth – than Genevieve Masters’s. As she compares Masters’s accoutrements to her own, she reinscribes a binaried hierarchy within women that creates desired and un-desired femininity. So strict is her automatic critique of pretty dress/unsuitable clothes and tall and slim/rolly polly that it literally affects her body; as Wilder’s palms sweat with shame, she physically manifests her feelings of inferiority.

Yet, when left on her own without a reference point for her physical “failings,” she rejects the signs of femininity that are prized on Genevieve. In recounting her daily chores in “Pioneer Girl,” she announces, “We had a cow again and it was my happy task to take her to pasture in the morning and bring her back at night […] I loved to wander along the creek and look at the flowers and wiggle my toes among the cool, lush grasses. I was such a great girl now that I wore my shoes all day, but I always went barefoot after the cow” (35). Here, Wilder’s status as a “great girl” demands that she constantly wear shoes, yet she refuses them in favor for activities that actually make her happy. Notably, Wilder’s moments of insecurity coincide with the presence of other women, possibly because a hierarchical society dictates that she constantly compare herself to others. Yet, when left solely with her own judgment, her barefoot performance of girlhood projects an embodiment of femininity that, while possibly shunned by Genevieve, contains self-value for Wilder.

While Wilder is occasionally able to “escape” the confines of traditional gender roles, she also makes pointed observations about the lives of other women. In joining her cousin, Lena, for the task of picking up clean laundry, the two learn of the reality of a recent but typical young
marriage: “‘She is only thirteen’ [the washerwoman] said proudly, ‘but, it is just as well to be married young.’ The bride was just my age and a year younger than Lena. As we talked about it going back, we (162) were glad we were not in her place but could run around and play as we were doing. We decided we didn’t mind helping with the work and the babies but as for us let someone else be responsible” (54). Here, thirteen is recognized as a threshold not only to adulthood, but as an entryway to a performance of “responsibility” and womanhood that is confining and restrictive.

Later on, Wilder describes the fate of a young woman, Missouri, who was denied even the agency in claiming ownership of the domestic realm in marriage: “She had five sisters and six brothers all married and still living there, but she said whenever she had a beau, something happened to drive him away. She couldn’t understand it until she overheard her mother telling a neighbor woman that she “aimed to keep Missoury [sic] at home to take care of me in my old age and so far I’ve managed to drive her beau away” (51). In this instance, the option against married life proves equally oppressive, as young woman are still viewed as little more than owned property. As John Stuart Mill corroborates in his germinal 1869 article, “The Subjection of Women,”

All women are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men; not self-will, and government by self-control, but submission, and yielding to the control of others. All the moralities tell them that it is the duty of women, and all the current sentimentalities that it is their nature, to live for others; to make complete abnegation of themselves, and to have no life but in their affections. And by their affections are meant the only ones they are allowed to have… (202)
While it is tempting to imagine a scenario where a woman such as Missouri simply leaves her parents in order to make her own living and / or marry the man she chooses, Mill, a relative contemporary of Wilder’s, demonstrates that such options do not exist within the lexicon of the subjugated woman. While Missouri’s skills in taking care of her mother suggest her capability in the domestic realm, or in any like-career, her identity was not constructed by an environment with her agency in mind; on the contrary, she was taught that her value was the equivalent to indentured servitude, and to submit to any orders that came her way. Within this culture, woman does not have an appropriate sense that she is a functioning and valued member of society, and it holds that she may then enforce those learned values upon her children, thus perpetuating a cycle of andocentrism. In the case of Missouri (absent from the published series), Wilder bears witness to a model in which woman are produced and reproduced as servants. As “Pioneer Girl” often reveals snippets of thoughts where Wilder considers her limited professions, such as babysitter and teacher, one wonders if she often pondered a future as bleak as other young women may have experienced.

Perhaps in an effort not to ghost her former humiliations, Wilder takes pains with her appearance as soon as her finances and abilities can afford her that idealized luxury. In “Pioneer Girl,” she offers a glimpse into her skills and success at re-creating the image of femininity she so prized in Genevieve. Again, due to the rarity of this type of revealing chronicle (it does not appear in the published series), I offer it in its entirety:

Fourth of July came with a grand celebration in De Smet. I had made a new dress for the occasion. It was of lawn, a very pale tint of pink, with a little spray of blue and rose flowers scattered over it. The waist was tight, buttoned down the front with small pearl buttons. On each side the closing and on each side down the
back were the tucks an inch wide. The neck was high with a band, the sleeves were long and close fitting. The skirt was made of straight breadth, very full, so full that the gathers had to be crowded and packed into the waist band. There were half tucks running around the skirt about three inches apart, the full length of the skirt and a three inch hem at the bottom. It just touched the ground and the hoops held it out beautifully. I had a new hat to go with this dress. It was of cream colored straw, with a ribbon a little darker in shade around the crown and three ostrich tips, shading from the light cream off the straw to a little darker than the ribbon, standing upright at one side. The hat sat on the top of my head and had a narrow brim with a little roll to it. My hair was worn, these days, combed smoothly back and braid [sic] in a thick braid that was wound around and around at the back of my head covering the whole back and pinned snugly in place. (299) My bangs hand grown out. Manly and I did not go to hear the speeches but in the afternoon we drove in to see the races. I wore my new outfit …” (100).
Fourth of July came with a grand celebration at DeSmet. I had made a new dress for the occasion. It was of lawn, a very pale tint of pink, with a little spray of blue and rose flowers scattered over it.

The waist was tight, buttoned down the front with small pearl buttons. On each side the opening and on each side down the back were two tucks, a half inch wide.

The neck was high with a band; the sleeves were long and close fitting.

The skirt was made of straight breadth, very full, so full that the gathers had to be crowded and packed into the waist band. There were half inch tucks running around the skirt about three inches apart, the full length of the skirt and a three inch hem at the bottom. It just reached the ground and the hoops held it up beautifully.

I had a new hat to go with this dress. It was of cream colored straw, with a ribbon a little darker in shade around the crown and three ostrich plumes, shading from the light cream of the straw to a little darker than the ribbon, standing upright at one side. The hat sat on top of my head and had a narrow brim with a little roll to it.

My hair was worn loose, these days combed smoothly back and braided in a thick braid that was wound around and around on the back of my head covering the whole back and pinned snugly at the side.
Clearly, Wilder has established a change in desired feminine appearance due to the quality of her dress. This time, her clothing is clean, fashionable, fits correctly, and is beautifully constructed, and as such so is Wilder. In comparison to the description of Wilder as a “young lady” found at the beginning of this chapter, she has taken the base physical markers of the performed identity (a dress shape befitting a physically mature female body, a skirt hem that covers the ankles, and a secure hairstyle that doesn’t hang in the face) and upgraded them in their quality. While this may be scrutinized as a simple attempt to conform to the patriarchal culture’s idealized version of femininity and womanhood (what Case earlier refers to as “invent[ing] its own representation of the gender”), I contend Wilder accomplishes more than merely demonstrating her dressmaking skills and access to money. Instead of simply embodying an oppressed woman subject to male consumption, Wilder’s discourse surrounding her performed body suggests a note of empowerment that was part of a growing women’s movement during the general time period.

In the 1850s and 1860s, an aesthetic movement of art and culture developed in England as a counteraction against the industrialization. Based on a refined sensibility of individually created art, and of art and beauty for its own sake, it spread to America over the next twenty years, bringing with it attitudes of openness and expression that “witnessed the emergence of shifting gender roles” (22). In her article, “Boundaries and the Victorian Body: Aesthetic Fashion in Gilded Age America,” Mary W. Blanchard charts the American aesthetic movement of the 1870s and 1880s as a particular boon for women, showcasing a “widening of the domestic sphere to include moral and social reform […] and a tentative excursion into professions.” In particular, many men and women began to use their bodies as canvases, utilizing high forms of
fashion as a performative personal expression of art. Blanchard views these performances as capable of transforming traditional gender roles, which, in turn, pave the way for greater shifts in the society at large. She postulates that “some women used their bodies and their dress as public art forms not only to defy the moral implications of domesticity but to assume cultural agency in their society at large. By creating herself as both performing public self and individual work of art, the aesthetic woman changed traditional concepts of the female as artistic object to the female as artistic subject.” For Blanchard, the ability of a woman to consider herself a subject concurrently means that she believes her own subjecthood contains worth. This empowerment then grants women an authority that challenges the perception of men as the dominant sex within society.

As Wilder doesn’t employ the typical dress code for aesthetic fashion (namely, designing and constructing a decidedly uncorseted long dress, usually worn in an urban setting), it may be easy to dismiss her from participating in the aesthetic movement. Yet, I maintain that she engages in the spirit of its making. The details of the dress are rich, and the discourse surrounding her “tight” waist, “thick” hair, and “beautifully” flowing skirt suggest a kind of sensual attention to the body within the clothes. Significantly, Wilder notes that she made this dress specifically in conjunction with the Fourth of July holiday, with the intention of wearing this outfit at a horse-racing event. Thus, these are not clothes designed for the wear that accompanies the housework of the day, but rather the kind of decoration for the body that is meant to be treated with respect and admired. In short, Wilder constructed these clothes with the intention of wearing them out in public, thus rendering her feminine self visible and troubling the absolute authority of the masculine domain.

23 Of course, those participating in the realms of high fashion were of a particular wealth and class.
Moreover, it is notable that – with the exception of the hat – Wilder crafted these clothes herself. As mentioned previously, the published series names a dressmaking shop as the location of Wilder’s first public employment, where she assists in making shirts and is particularly praised for her ability to create fast, perfect buttonholes. Later on, she takes on expanded sewing duties at the shop of another dressmaker, Mrs. McKee, and then another shop run by a Miss Bell. Thus, if only for a short time in her life, Wilder is able to financially support herself as a skilled craftsperson, and displays confidence in her mastery of the trade in the thorough illustration of her holiday dress.

In consequence, Wilder’s skills and pride in her trade liberate her from confines that characterize Missouri’s life choices and identity. In the following passage in “Pioneer Girl,” Wilder describes her experience wearing a store-bought hat with ostrich feathers for the first time: “A particularly violent jump of the horses combined with the wind that blew strongly, tore the bunch of ostrich tips from my hat and I first barely caught them as they were sailing away […] I was angry as I shoved my damaged hat to Ma. “If you want anything done,” I said, “do it yourself. I never sewed a feather on, for Miss Bell, that would come loose.” (101). Wilder’s anger over her disfigured hat is notable in that it simultaneously reveals self-assurance in regards to her sewing skills and ability to make money, as well as a general regard in her ability to do things properly. Tellingly, in her moment of high emotional intensity, she expresses that she is able to do anything. While it is seemly simplistic to look at a singular word choice and apply that to everything else in Wilder’s life, I contend that the “heat of the moment” quality to the sentence is what makes it valuable; clearly, Wilder regards herself as an able bodied person with the ability to perform a multitude of tasks. This intrinsic, automatic self-confidence is a

24 Again, as previously noted, “Pioneer Girl” reports that the Ingalls family ran the Masters Hotel with Wilder’s assistance years before this incident, as well as numerous jobs babysitting. While Wilder indeed finds later employment crafting shirts at the dressmaker’s, its status as her first job may be called into question.
substantial progression from above-described Missouri, who is unable to visualize any space
where she can claim agency for herself, as well as oppressive patriarchy described by John Stuart
Mill. Here, the offhand way Wilder discusses her own usefulness is proof of the very self-
esteeem that subverts and destroys the submissive myths of patriarchy. As Wilder prepares to
step out in public on the Fourth of July, she carries with her pride in her accomplishments, a
history of public service, and a displaying of her work/body that assists in reconfiguring
traditional binaries of private femininity and public masculinity.

Transformations: Becoming Bess

While Wilder does not utilize “Pioneer Girl” to engage in overt feminist language
regarding the oppression of the feminine, there are still identifying moments that point to the
formation of the standpoint Wilder expresses in the Missouri Ruralist in June, 1918: “We have
been privileged to look on and criticize the way the world has been run. ‘A man-made world’
we have called it now and then, implying that women would have done so much better in
managing its affairs. The signs indicate that we are going to have a chance to remake it nearer to
the heart’s desire” (220). While Wilder is specifically addressing woman’s suffrage, the fact that
she notes it may be possible to “remake” patriarchy suggests a belief that women have the ability
to construct and deconstruct the power systems which govern their existence. This slipperiness
of construction, a key trope of materialist feminism, also figures into Wilder’s earliest
conceptions of self within “Pioneer Girl.” When sister Mary (who is probably around seven
years old at this time, making Wilder around five years) goes off to school, Wilder tries to study
with her in the evenings, and, by degrees, learns to read. During one of her earliest literary
efforts, she makes the following discovery: “But I was horrified when one day I read a little story
beginning ‘Laura was a glutton,’ and Ma explained to me what a glutton was. I could hardly be comforted even when she said it did not mean me and I need not be like that though my name was Laura” (17). While Wilder does not use the formal language of semiotics, she nonetheless, learns the difference between the signifier and signified through her mother’s explanation. In contemplating that the sound image of “Laura” need not remain synonymous with the signified “glutton,” Wilder begins to realize that she may decide to perform the concept of herself / “Laura” any way she wants.

In outlining a theory of women’s autobiography, Shari Benstock states, “The consciousness behind the narrative ‘I’ develops over time, encompassing more and more of the external landscape and becoming increasingly aware of the implications of action and events, but this consciousness - and the ‘I’ it supports - remains stable. The dissection of self-analysis premises the cohesion of a restructured self” (1048). While Benstock applies this idea to written work (that can certainly work in conjunction with tracking Wilder’s construction of identity in “Pioneer Girl,” as exemplified in this section), I contend that it is also possible to extend this to mirror Wilder’s growing construction of the self. Thus, she realizes that it is possible to have power in the individual process of becoming, and that symbolic conceptions of the relationship between the self and world hold value. As she becomes “Laura,” she can choose to embody gluttony or not, and, based on her actions, can concurrently shape what the performance of “Laura” means.

The semiotic relationship between signified and signifier is similarly negotiated throughout “Pioneer Girl,” as Wilder exercises authority in naming/re-conceiving subjects in her narrative. While there are archival letters documenting Wilder’s desire to attain factual names and dates in regards to figures from her early childhood, it is curious that she takes deliberate
poetic license with others. During a speech entitled “My Work,” Wilder describes some of her efforts towards historical accuracy. She explains,

In writing Little House on the Prairie I could not remember the name of the Indian Chief who saved the whites from massacre. It took weeks of research before I found it [Soldat du Chêne]. In writing books that will be used in schools such things must be right and the manuscript is submitted to experts before publication. (qtd. In Vavra 2)

As noted throughout this dissertation, Wilder was concerned that her writing provides a truthful portrait of her early life of pioneering, so that others may get the chance to re-experience this formation of American culture. Here, these same concerns are present as Wilder insinuates that any text which is used to educate children or that is subject to public consumption must be as factually accurate as possible.

And yet, given her views, there are some names with which she takes obvious, poetic license. For example, during Wilder’s first teaching job at age fifteen, she was boarded at the Bouchie household, and not the Brewster’s, as reported in These Happy Golden Years. Similarly, the character of Nellie Oleson appears to be an amalgamation of three young girls, Nellie Owens, Genevieve Masters, and, during the period of Wilder’s courtship, Stella Gilbert. Yet, as shown in “Pioneer Girl,” not only is Genevieve the originator of many of the incidents attributed to Oleson within the published series, but the name of Owens is further altered to Oleson. The fact that she was trying to disguise the identities of the Bouchie and Owens

25 In her booklet Who Really Saved Laura Ingalls: Soldat du Chêne or a soldat du chien, Stephanie A. Vavra points out that, despite her valid research, Wilder was most likely given an incorrect interpretation of the name of the Osage Indian she was searching for, through no fault of her own. From her studies on the French language and Osage culture, Vavra points out that, as stated in the books, Soldat du Chêne (literally “Soldier of the Oak / Oak Soldier), is an unlikely candidate, as the Oak was extremely scarce in Kansas. The cottonwood, however, was sacred to the Osage and had many “namesakes.” Vavra believes Wilder’s research led her to a simple mistranslation of a soldat du chien. Similar in spelling and pronunciation, a soldat du chien (literally soldier of the dog / dog soldiers) was a common title of respect and courage that referred to one who protected others.
families seems unlikely, as, due to the fact that many of the incidents described in the books were not completed by Owens, would logically not be recognizable to her had she encountered them. Additionally, the Bouchie family was rather widespread in the area near De Smet. As described in *These Happy Golden Years*, while Wilder taught at the Bouchie school and stayed at the home of Louis and Olive Bouchie, Bouchie nieces and nephews were her primary students. As Wilder’s descriptions of this time appear altered in name only, the Bouchie family would instantly be recognizable to anyone who was familiar with the area, or who did even the slightest research on land ownership (and there have been many who have engaged that area of study). These name changes are particularly significant as they represent the primary negative figures in Wilder’s life: Mrs. Bouchie exhibiting signs of mental instability and a frightening incident with a knife, and Masters and Owens as childhood nemeses with unkind attitudes and superficial values. Here, the process of re-naming may serve to de-emphasize the power they have had in Wilder’s life, as well as exemplified the power of authorship.

Correspondingly, Wilder exhibits the same power in defining her own name and subsequent relationship with Almanzo Wilder. In “Pioneer Girl,” she pointedly refers to him throughout the narrative with the increasing intimacy that exemplifies their relationship at the time. For example, her first sight of him does not identity him by name, because she does not know who he was. Later, he is “Mr. Wilder.” The following passage, absent from the published series, addresses the moment that Wilder decides to engage in a formal relationship with Almanzo Wilder, and also showcases a symbolic ritual of naming:

“I fully intended not to go with you any more,” I said, “I was going to stay home until some one else asked me, but now I’m here, what am I going to call you? I’m

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26 As it was, the whereabouts of the Owens family did not become publicly available until quite recently. Research shows it is highly unlikely that Nellie Owens read the “Little House” books, and was aware a character had been partially created in her likeness.
tired of saying Mr. Wilder and then explaining that I mean the youngest Wilder boy and the crowd will laugh at me if I call you Mr. Wilder to them.” He told me his folks call him Manzo except his brother Roy who called him Mannie. “Manzo is ugly,” I said, “I’ll call you Manly like Roy does” and when he told me of my mistake, I said I would call him Manly anyway for Mannie was silly.

(292) “And what shall I call you?” Manly asked. “I have a sister in Laura and I never did like the name. What is your second name?” So I said the old nursery rhyme, “Elizabeth, Elisbeth, Betsy and Bess went over the river to seek a bird’s nest. They found one with three eggs in. They each took one and left two in,” and he said he would call me Bessie. (98-99)

Importantly, Wilder is the one who initiates a process of re-naming for the purposes of positive association with what she considers an aesthetically displeasingly sound image for her, and a confusing one for him. As Ferdinand de Saussure recounts his model of semiotics he states “we have seen in considering the speaking-circuit that both terms involved in the linguistic sign [signified and signifier] are psychological and are united in the brain by an associate bond” (963). Thus, as the basis of language is a psychological and social way of knowing, those involved in the society have power to shape and make meaning out of the way it is experienced. In linking the notion of the sign to the process of autobiography, the author has particular power in creating and reshaping signs. Within “Pioneer Girl,” Wilder exercises power in constructing her world as she alters the signified and the signifier as she sees fit. Moreover, as she allows Almanzo to call her by a name other than “Laura,” she acknowledges what Saussure refers to as the “arbitrary” nature of semiotics and the constructed nature of making meaning; Wilder’s sense
of self-worth - who she is - remains unchanged as she chooses to respond to “Bessie.” The fact that she offers multiple names for Almanzo suggests a sense of self that cannot be essentialized.

This attitude of female self-worth is evident throughout Wilder’s courtship with Almanzo Wilder. After a particularly pleasant ride in the country one evening, Wilder notices Almanzo’s pensive attitude and inquires what he is thinking:

“A penny for your thoughts,” said I.

“I was wondering if you would like an engagement ring,” he answered.

I gave a startled gasp. “That would depend,” I said, “on who should offer it to me.”

“Would you take it from me,” he asked, and I said, “Yes!”

Then we drove on in some more silence until I got down at the door. I started to go in, then stopped and asked, “Aren’t you going to kiss me good night?” (103)
As Wilder serves as the instigator for both the wedding proposal and her first kiss, she exudes a confidence and curiosity not always encouraged in “good girls” of her age and social station. More important is her reaction to Almanzo’s actual inquiry as to her wishes regarding an engagement ring. While it does not seem likely that Wilder will turn down her beau’s offer and that she is secretly dating other young men, the brazenness of her answer showcases a belief that she has choices in life, and that she believes she is deserving and worthy of the best. The display of her confidence is truly a radical act.

The final pages of “Pioneer Girl” go on to document Wilder’s preparations for her wedding, the actual ceremony and family reception, and her first evening in her new home. Interestingly, the arc of the piece takes on a cyclical shape as Wilder’s move with Almanzo
mirrors that which describes the Ingalls family within the opening lines of the text. While both
highlight the act of moving and creating a home, the difference in this final move is an
overwhelming sense of confidence and ownership, as opposed to the curiosity and observation
exhibited approximately fifteen years earlier. The very last line of “Pioneer Girl” reveals the
confidence and responsibility she has attained on the day of her marriage and her move away
from her parents and sisters: “I had a house and a home of my own” (110). Given that the theme
of building communities is present throughout the published series to the point that two of the
books contain the word house in the title (Little House in the Big Woods and Little House on the
Prairie), the final sentence of “Pioneer Girl” touches on one of the major ideas within the
“Wilder lexicon.” Significantly, Wilder notes the subtle distinction between the often
interchangeable house and home: the former being the physical structure where one lives, while
the latter can also refer to feelings of contentment, a sense of belonging, and corporeal
connection.27 In asserting her singular, subjective (I) ownership of house and home, there is also
a simultaneous declaration of a sense of self. For, as she claims a space designed for the
embodiment of her being, Wilder likewise acknowledges the importance of personal expression,
and the ways that knowledge and acceptance of self signify power.

Laura Ingalls Wilder grew up in a time that placed women and femininity in the bottom
section of a social and political, gendered hierarchy. The popular nineteenth-century proverb “a
whistling woman and a crowing hen are neither fit for God nor men” (Simpson 332) reiterates

27 The Oxford English Dictionary’s listed definitions for home include “an estate, a possession”; “the seat of
domestic life and interests”; “The place of one’s dwelling or nurturing, with the conditions, circumstances, and
feelings which naturally and properly attach to it, and are associated with it”; “A place, region, or state to which one
properly belongs, in which one's affections centre, or where one finds refuge, rest, or satisfaction”; and “The seat,
centre, or native habitat, the place or region where a thing is native, indigenous, or most common.”
the patriarchal worldview that women were inferior to men and equated with the level of animals. Furthermore, while only (male) roosters crow, a hen that is suddenly able to move beyond the clucking confines of her physiological make-up is considered unnatural and a crime against God’s creation. Thus the first half of the aphorism labels women as unequipped to perform the same displays of personal expression as men, nor can they expect to change without upsetting the natural laws of the world; in effect women (and hens) have a lesser voice, and, as such, less power. While this universalist view of gendered identity may be considered normative for many living in the later 1800s, this chapter contends that there are – however small – performances of female agency to be found in the face of rigid patriarchal oppression. The following exchange between a young Almanzo Wilder and his sister, Alice, within Farmer Boy, illustrates this point:

Almanzo plucked a grass-stem and made it whistle between his thumbs. Alice tried, but she could not do that. She could pucker her mouth and whistle. Royal teased her. “Whistling girls and crowing hens / Always come to some bad ends” (127) […] Almanzo asked [Alice] if she didn’t want to be a boy. She said yes, she did. Then she said no, she didn’t. […] “Well, I like to make butter and I like to patch quilts. And cook, and sew, and spin. Boys can’t do that. But even if I be a girl, I can drop potatoes and sow carrots and drive horses as well as you can.”

“You can’t whistle on a grass stem,” Almanzo said. (130)

While Alice is gently teased by her brothers regarding her ability to whistle on a grass stem, she appears to consider Almanzo’s query regarding sex and gender as serious, and answers it as such. Elsewhere in the narrative, she laments the fact that she must study while the boys are allowed to stay home from school and pick wintergreen berries, and perhaps it is instances such
as these which prompt an impulsive wish to become a boy. And yet, further thought changes Alice’s mind: not only does she enjoy and value her performance of traditional feminine activities, but she notes her ability to participate in masculine occupations with the same skill level as her brothers. Alice’s ability to embody such acts as driving horses and sowing grain negates the authenticity of Royal’s teasing proverb, showcasing the arbitrary nature of gendered divisions. Moreover, while Alice is able to move freely (at least in part) within the realms of masculinity, Almanzo and Royal may not do the same in the feminine areas of domesticity, thus exposing both the fluidity and complexity of both masculinity and femininity.

While Wilder’s considerations of authorship and subjectivity contribute to assertions of identity, her work also engages with the behavioral principles grounding materialist feminism. Stemming from Simone de Beauvoir’s germinal statement that “one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman,” materialist feminism calls for a reading that travels beyond simple biology toward social forces that enact within and without the body to construct gendered behavior. Judith Butler likens the construction of gender to Performance Studies’ notion of “repeated” behavior informing who we are; thus, the nucleus of what constitutes gender does not actually exist, but is rather a set of malleable, learned, cultural norms. She radically asserts that “the various acts of gender creates the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis” (1099).

In this chapter, I have grappled with questions surrounding Wilder’s identity within the text of “Pioneer Girl.” While she grew up in a time period in which the success of a society (particularly the pioneering family unit) centered around the rigidity of performed gender roles, I have uncovered many instances in which Wilder troubles the boundaries of what it means to perform masculinity and femininity. While, on the surface, Wilder engages in traditional
femininity through her clothing, her skills with domestic work, and her decision to engage in heterosexual marriage; in short, there does not appear to be any subversive activity at work. Yet, I have shown that, even as a child, Wilder viewed her life without any preconceived notations about what it was possible for her to become: she shared Pa’s “masculine” love adventure and the outdoors, while Ma equipped her with the education and skills that allowed her to support herself and use her intellect to feel empowered. As Wilder is able to embody aspects of both traditional genders, she is an example of Butler’s notion that gender is truly nothing but a performance. As shown in following “Pioneer Girl” anecdote, Wilder’s only constant appears to be her willingness to showcase fearlessness:

Sunday afternoon when Manly drove up the horses were worse than usual and Ma didn’t want me to go. But Lee told her I was safe enough. “That fellow knows how to handle horses,” he said. But that night he said to me, “Don’t trust the driver too far, Laura. It isn’t always safe.” I laughed and answered, “If the driver fails me, I can do the driving myself. (101)

Fig. 8: Wilder can do the driving herself.
Chapter Four
By Her Own Movement: The Process of Writing and the Birth of the Reader

Stephen Greenblatt opens his work, Shakespearean Negotiations, not with a quotation from a play or a historical anecdote, but with an exploration of his own state of mind upon conducting research. He reveals, “I began with the desire to speak with the dead […] It was true that I could hear only my own voice, but my own voice was the voice of the dead, for the dead had contrived to leave textual traces of themselves, and those traces make themselves heard in the voices of the living” (1). Despite the fact that any investigation of peoples and performances of the past is problematic, Greenblatt does not view the task as impossible, believing that traces of the past exist in the present. Significantly, he acknowledges that, in order to understand the identity these traces embody, he must begin with a study of his own. As Greenblatt uses his voice to divine Shakespeare and the social contexts in which he lived, I decide to adopt his strategy in my quest to speak to Laura Ingalls Wilder, who died twenty-two years before I was born.

In March of 2008, I found that my search for Laura led me to the Western Historical Manuscript Collection in Columbia, Missouri. After showing identification, filling out the appropriate paperwork, and leaving most of my belongings in a holding area, I was led to a small, dark room with two microfilm readers. An archivist arrived with two rolls of microfilm, patiently showed me how to turn on the machine, load the film, adjust the focus, angle, and zoom lenses, and then kindly explained it all again when I immediately forgot half of what she told me. Because the second I saw the introductory pages flash onto the microfilm reader’s screen, “Wilder, Laura Ingalls (1867-1957), Papers, 1894-1943 (C3633): 34 folders on Microfilm,” I was lost to her. As the archivist showed me how to fast-forward the reel at different speeds, pages of handwriting whizzed and buzzed passed by without the chance to get a good look.
Instead of paying attention to my instructions, I was occupied with my own voice: What kinds of documents would I find, and how would they speak to me? Did Laura write in print or cursive, and was her handwriting neat or sloppy? What papers did she save and why? What events did she choose to devote her attention to? How might these papers be different from what was written in the series? What did she leave out or change and why? How do these relate to who she was and how she saw herself?

When I was finally left alone, I shut my eyes for a moment and quieted myself, so that I might be centered and alert to discerning potential answers to my questions. I then opened them, and as soon as I saw the first heading of “Pioneer Girl,” followed by neat, cursive script that completely covered every sheet of lined paper, I knew the trip was worth it. The first lines of the text revealed that, although the general material was something I was familiar with, the details were not; this was something new. I felt as though I had been given a special gift, something personal and private. Even though the microfilm rolls are scanned copies of the original documents, there is curious intimacy in seeing the “50 cent” cover of Wilder’s old notebooks, and the frayed edges of the pages she wrote on. This is not something to rush through, it is a work to be lingered over, and the details appreciated. Nonetheless, it takes me forty-five minutes to scan the first folder. There are thirty-three more. I felt a sudden rush of gratefulness for Western Historical Manuscript Society’s policies regarding inter-library loan.

Since my time in Columbia, Missouri, I have spent the better part of two years focusing my attention on Folders 1-6 of the Laura Ingalls Wilder microfilm collection, otherwise known as the handwritten work, “Pioneer Girl.” This decision to concentrate on this particular section stems not only from the impossibility of analyzing all thirty-four rolls, but because I believe they have the best chance of answering my questions – of speaking back to me. Throughout the
months of my transcribing the hand-written document, the comparisons to the “Little House” series, an analysis of its content and its status as an edited document, I have come to view the work as an embodiment of Greenblatt’s “textual trace” of the past, and a voice for Wilder. For, while it is my own enthusiasm and choices that guide my study of “Pioneer Girl,” it is also the product of her recollections and feelings, and a creation born from her labor. As the text is engaged by the reader (me), and the process of its construction is revisited, I believe it is able to produce its own performance.

In this chapter, I investigate the identity of the text, using “Pioneer Girl” as my main primary source. I begin by surveying the possible embodiment and function of the text, including statements by its author and various critical receptions, and showing the text’s resistance to the traditional labels and boundaries of literature. I then move on to the performance of the text as palimpsest, exploring myriad of ways the text has been edited, added to, and how its shape changes and grows. Next, I track the ways in which the text marks subjectivity, and how the relationship between text and reader / spectator produces meaning. Finally, I outline my own performative experience as a reader of this text, and use qualitative tools to show how its identity intertwines with my own. While my previous chapters are organized linearly and / or chronologically, I take a different tactic here. Instead of a steadily building an argument, I use the various sections of the chapter to cyclically expound on the same theme, mirroring “Pioneer Girl’s” semi-episodic exploration of what it means to develop a sense of self. Thus, I offer “Pioneer Girl” as a performing, living document.
Form and Function

Laura Ingalls Wilder has long noted that she was inspired to publish the “Little House” series because she wanted children to vicariously experience what she maintains is the truth of her childhood. She states:

Children today could not have a childhood like mine in the Big Woods of Wisconsin but they could learn of it and hear the stories that Pa used to tell. But I put off writing them from year to year and was sixty when I wrote my first book, *The Little House in the Big Woods* […] Every story in this novel, all the circumstances, each incident are true. All I have told is true but it is not the whole truth. There were some stories I wanted to tell but would not be responsible for putting in a book for children, even though I knew them as child […] There was the family of children frozen in the terrible blizzard on Plum Creek. I couldn’t tell that either. (LORE 7-9)

While Wilder is adamant in her insistence of the “truth” of her work, she readily admits that truth is not an absolute concept; it is possible to omit from (and perhaps add to) her writing and still fall within the realm of truth. Noting that there are varying layers and gradations of what is considered true, she makes the distinction that recreating the “whole truth” may be withheld in favor of the truth of artistic intent. Because Wilder claims she was inspired to write her published works for children, it is understandable that she excludes those incidents that may be inappropriate for younger ages. 

28 Similarly, as she concedes that her writing is influenced by

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28 As a more detailed example, Wilder offers the Bender family, who provide the only shelter on an often-travelled road. When people begin disappearing, townspeople investigate their property; while the Benders escape, mutilated corpses and graves are found in abundance. When Pa leaves one night with a group of “vigilantes” to track the Benders, he does not offer any details upon his return. Wilder states, “They never were found and later I formed my own conclusions why. You will agree it is not a fit story for a children’s book” (LORE 9).
the needs of her desired audience, Wilder demonstrates a relationship between author, text, and audience.

As Wilder contends that truth exists on multiple planes, it is not a surprise that she exercises this belief in her writing, claiming veracity in both “Pioneer Girl” and the “Little House” series, despite discrepancies in content and form. Yet, though Wilder displays what we now might refer to as a distinctly post-modern approach to truth, her critics have not always approached her work through the same lens, viewing them as inferior to writing that adheres to a more traditional, strict format. In this section, I work to dispel the myth that a malleable structure and sense of truthfulness contain little meaning. Instead, I assert that “Pioneer Girl’s” resistance to essentialization works to expand the boundaries of what constitutes a truthful, valued text, thus creating more space for embodiment.

Since critics and scholars have first had access to “Pioneer Girl,” it has been viewed in comparison to the published works of the “Little House” series and to historical fact, and has often been found lacking in both form and artistry next to its well-known counterparts. Perhaps because it troubles the divide between truth and fiction, the work has been subjected to a string of negative criticism. Historian John E. Miller summarizes the general sentiment regarding truth in all of Wilder’s written work:

> What needs to be understood, however, is that the novels, while based in fact, are fiction, and the author relied on the tools that fiction writers normally employ.

> While we can assume that many of the episodes happened roughly the way they...

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29 For example, as stated in the introduction of this dissertation, while Wilder lists dates and ages in “Pioneer Girl” that match historical records, she feels free to alter them for the published series. In Chapter Two, I discuss Wilder’s departure from the traditional structure for autobiographical works in her ability to recall exact dialogue at an age where such an endeavor is extremely unlikely, as well as her prevalence to omit certain key details from her life.
are described, we should not equate the fictional Laura with the real person who wrote the stories and upon whom they are based. (*Becoming* 3)

While based in life experience, the work was regarded more as fiction, and thus subject to the rules of “traditional” juvenile novels.

In July of 1930, Wilder sent “Pioneer Girl,” to Rose Wilder Lane, who spent several weeks typing and making edits to the hand-written text before sending it to her New York literary agent, George Bye. Bye initially turned down the story, commenting to Lane that it didn’t contain the craftsmanship and polish that he believed would excite readers: “It didn’t seem to have enough high points or crescendo […] A fine old lady was sitting in a rocking chair and telling a story chronologically but with no benefit of perspective or theatre” (qtd in Hill, 7). In 1931, Harper & Brothers editor Virginia Kirkus expressed similar concerns to Wilder regarding her semi-formal style, stating “We seem to be a little in the dark as to the exact source of your material […] I had understood when your manuscript was given to me to read, that it was autobiographical. …Won’t you send us an autobiographical sketch so that we can see just how this material fits into your own background” (qtd. in Hill 11)? Curiously, the discrepancy between the label of autobiography and Wilder’s style of writing seems to disturb Kirkus more than the actual content.

Interestingly, when sections of “Pioneer Girl” were reworked into *Little House in the Big Woods* one year later, the label *and* style of a fictional work with the *feel* of autobiography is pleasing to critics. In one of the book’s earliest reviews in January of 1932, Jessie Hirschl writes:

It should be read by all Middle border children — and by many others, to whom its experiences will not be even an echo of word-of-mouth inheritance. Too few,
nowadays, can tell as real and treasurable a story. Moreover, this story is
delightfully told. Its simple sentences have a gentle cadence suggesting the plain
and gracious prose-poetry of the author of “The Time of Man.” They are lit up
throughout by an awareness of all things, inanimate or living, and this awareness
fills all the pages with bright picture-patches, like the pretty flower patterned
calico bits in a quilt […] The book’s make-up is entirely in character. (5)

Here, Hirschl describes Wilder’s writing as akin to “poetry,” and praises the fact that precious
few contemporary authors can tell “as real a story,” suggesting (oddly) that the ultimate goal of a
fictional story is to come close to feeling “real.” Yet, while poetic imagery and heightened
realism are admired in writing historical fiction, those qualities are not valued in an
autobiographical nonfiction piece, such as “Pioneer Girl.” Perhaps because the detail Wilder
uses in describing early events and conversations is not realistically possible, the amount of
poetic license used negates the work status as an exemplar of traditional autobiography.
Additionally, as there is no central conflict, or overt set of themes or plot points within “Pioneer
Girl,” it becomes difficult to imagine the work as popular and successful to potential readers.

Similarly, the bulk of Wilder criticism pinpoints as its primary source material the
published series and, to a lesser extent, some of her local newspaper articles published in the
Missouri Ruralist, to which she contributed to from 1911 - 1924, the later nine years as a regular
columnist. More recently, scholars have given attention to early drafts of the books or in letters
written during their construction. As Pamela Hill describes the function of “Pioneer Girl,” she
states that Wilder’s “autobiography offers a factual record of her childhood and charts her
growth as a writer of fiction. It also illuminates the gaps between Wilder’s fiction and the facts
of her own life, illustrating how she supplemented fragmented, impressionistic memories of
childhood with stories she has heard from her parents and older sister Mary” (7). In effect, a binary is created wherein Wilder’s handwritten work is marginalized in relation to the finalized, published material. As evidenced by the fact that there is yet to be a scholarly study that privileges these works, Wilder’s articles, handwritten drafts and documents regarding their construction are then de-valued and viewed as subordinate and incomplete in conjunction with their published counterparts. As the published “Little House” series continues to enjoy popularity within the public sphere, the privatized location of “Pioneer Girl” is constricted in its ability to speak.

While scholars agree the content of “Pioneer Girl” spans the length of time and mirrors the material addressed in the “Little House series (from childhood through the day of Wilder’s marriage), they differ in how that content functions. Anita Clair Fellman focuses on the public consumption of the work in speculating that Wilder “had written the ‘Pioneer Girl’ memoir perhaps hoping to serve her father’s stories and certainly to make money” (64-5). The fact that Fellman recognizes the work primarily as a vehicle for the familial tales she grew up with suggests she believes “Pioneer Girl” contains autobiographical/“truthful” material, and perhaps that she was willing to shape those stories in conjunction with what a potential audience might find favorable. As recently as 2007, Wilder scholar Pamela Smith Hill comments on the lesser quality of “Pioneer Girl:” “Not many writers would want their readers to see their first drafts. The initial tentative, foggy shape a story takes on paper rarely resembles the final polished work readers see in print, whether fiction or nonfiction […] The manuscript was [Wilder’s] own personal story, a memoir, an unembellished attempt to set family stories and memories on paper, a rough draft” (10-11). Finally, William Anderson describes Wilder’s work as a “story of her life,” and notes that, despite the fact that an edited version of the “Pioneer Girl” manuscript was
sent to multiple editors and magazines, “Again, no one accepted it” (*Biography* 195-196).

Interestingly, while “story,” can refer to either factual past events, or a fictional narrative, Anderson does not comment on his selective discourse; furthermore, the “acceptance” could also refer to the actual decision not to publish the manuscript, or be taken as a comment that the narrative itself is not valid or correct in form or content. What is clear is that there are multiple ways to view “Pioneer Girl.” Judging by its initial rejection for publication in the 1930s, as well as the amount of scholarly attention paid to the manuscript in comparison to the “Little House” books, “Pioneer Girl” has a long history of being viewed as the inferior work of a constructed binary, the lesser partner to the works of the published, “polished” series.

Despite this trend, I contend that “Pioneer Girl’s” lack of “acceptance” is not due to an innate deficiency within the piece, but rather a set of conventions that dictates the way the work should perform within a patriarchal culture. As Judith Fetterley argues in her book, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*,

> Literature is political […] the pretense that literature speaks universal truths through forms from which all the merely personal, the purely subjective, has been burned away or at least transformed through the medium of art into representation. When only one reality is encouraged, legitimized, and transmitted and when that limited vision endlessly insists on its comprehensiveness, then we have the conditions necessary for that confusion of consciousness in which impalpability flourishes. (xi)

For Fetterley, literature that is praised for its objectivity and its attention to public society performs the values of an andocentric culture, while feminine writing that explores the depths of subjectivity and the personal are relegated to the margins of tolerability. “Pioneer Girl,” with its
focus on feminine perspectives, poetic imagery, fluidity in construction (discussed at length below), accompanied by the author’s claim of truthfulness, conclusively fulfills the requirements for de-valued, feminine literature. As such, “Pioneer Girl” is not “bad” writing, instead, it performs feminine qualities that are not judged worthy within an andocentric paradigm.

Furthermore, the act of labeling writing as valuable/not valuable is not a practice unique to the patriarchal twentieth century America, but stretches back for millennia. In particular, editor George Bye’s earlier phrasing regarding “Pioneer Girl’s” lack of what he terms “theatre” is especially revealing, as the ideals of spectacle and theatrics have been upheld as literary and dramatic models for over two thousand years. First described in Aristotle’s Poetics in Ancient Greece, the supremacy of the Aristotelian model (which favors a theatrical plot) is still considered by many to articulate the proper design for writing. As Marvin Carlson notes, “The primacy of Aristotle’s Poetics in theatrical theory as well as in literary theory is unchallenged. Not only is the Poetics the first significant work in the tradition, but its major concepts and lines of argument have continually influenced the development in theory throughout the centuries” (Theory 15). The six elements of tragedy – plot, character, thought, diction, song, and spectacle – work together with the principles of unity of action and reversal and recognition in order to achieve a purging of emotions. In his description of the basic building blocks of modern script analysis, Charles S. Waxberg further elaborates on those components that have been valued as central to successful plot composition: “Balance, exposition, rising actions, and events, climax and resolution have evolved from Aristotle’s outline for play composition. This masculine structure unifies all the script’s actions to fuel the ultimate climactic event. Digressions from this focus weaken the play as they interrupt the momentum toward the climax” (11). While Waxberg points to Aristotle’s enduring influence on dramatic writing, he significantly notes that this
paradigm of writing is “masculine,” which infers that there are feminine structures of writing as well. Waxberg may also be alluding to the fact that Aristotle’s original conclusions were derived from engaging a great deal of theatre which was written by men, acted by men, generally portrayed the public life of men, and was often audience by men only. Thus, the standards for writing that have sustained for centuries were quite literally formed without women’s lives or perspectives in mind. Perhaps the fact that all eight of the best-selling “Little House” books are generally yearly episodes structured around the Ingalls’ struggle to survive against the elements - as well as the conflicting parental desires of social stability and education versus constant westward movement - is a testament to Bye’s observation that successful books need to contain “theatre.” Yet, it is important to note that these works are not only showcasing a masculine technique, but also performing normative culture, as well. As Bye connects “theatre” with the idea of “perspective,” he further suggests that Wilder has neither the experience nor the authority to write her life, thus implying that female lives do not have a valued space within society.

As feminists work to undo a culture and history of andocentrism, the discourse surrounding what constitutes “good” writing is beginning to be similarly unpacked. As Helene Keyssar notes, the dramatic arc associated with Aristotle’s writings privileges masculine notions of linearity and hierarchy, while, historically, any work that does not adhere to that structure is noted as weak. Instead, she works to uncover a feminist module for re-experiencing and re-coding literary and performance works:

Aristotle argued that drama achieved its effect on the audience by presenting a character who comes to know himself […] Drama has thus traditionally urged us to know ourselves better, to search our histories and to reveal to ourselves and others who we “really” are. In feminist drama, the impetus is not towards self-
recognition and revelation of a “true” self but towards recognition of others and a concomitant transformation of the self and the world. (xiii-xiv)

As feminine drama values conceptions of transformation - instead of revelation - of the self, the hierarchy favoring an end product is destabilized in favor of continued process and movement within the piece. Therefore, I advocate a reading of “Pioneer Girl’s” vision and form that values those qualities of ambiguity and cyclical development that have previously been viewed as detractors of worth.

The ambiguity of purposeful spectatorship is perhaps one of the most “troubling” aspects of “Pioneer Girl.” To begin with, most of the text is written in the format of a first person, reminiscent viewpoint (e.g. From page 1: “I lay and looked through the opening in the wagon”). As noted in the previously-discussed introduction of Almanzo Wilder within “Pioneer Girl,”30 Wilder is not prone to front-loading an event before it occurs; instead, she describes events and people chronologically and in present tense, as they occurred. This format could easily be found in any diary, personal narrative, or published work, and, while the “Little House” series uses a third-person omniscient viewpoint, it also follows the same chronology in building narrative.

Yet, scattered throughout the text (mainly through added items / edits) are a handful of descriptions and events that trouble the notion to which a particular, absolute audience and brand of spectatorship should be adhered. In concentrating on those spaces that deviate from endorsing a traditional, “rough draft” audiencing of “Pioneer Girl,” I am participating in meaning making from the standpoint of Judith Fetterley’s “resisting reader.” As she expresses, “Consciousness is power. To create a new understanding of our literature is to make possible a new effect of that literature on us. And to make possible a new effect is in turn to provide the conditions for

30 For example, within “Pioneer Girl,” when Wilder details her first meeting with Almanzo Wilder, she mentions that she thought he was the younger “Mr. Wilder,” she had heard about, before he introduces himself. She does not say something like, “And then I saw the man who would become my future husband.”
changing the culture that the literature reflects” (xx). Thus, in providing an alternative viewpoint for reading and positively valuing “Pioneer Girl,” this act of re-reading becomes a performance that participates in undoing andocentrism.

Interestingly, there are only three instances within the entire text of “Pioneer Girl” in which Wilder addresses a specific audience. The first comes about three quarters into the piece; in describing a series of three day blizzards, Wilder notes the pattern of brief respite between storms: “Two days between storms was a remarkable event. It gave the impression of a malignant power of destruction wreaking havoc as long as possible, then pausing for breath to go on with the work. Or as Pa forcibly put it, ‘The blizzard just let go to spit on its hands.’ (This is an old woodsman's saying. Do you get it)” (76)? The notation of “you” suggests both an awareness of and intimacy with the reader, as well as an acknowledgment that Wilder's narrative contains worth and deserves attention. In addressing the reader personally, Wilder challenges her to engage and identify with the text. Later on, as Wilder describes the beauty of June's wild roses she states, “They were a low growing bush and, when in bloom, the blossoms made masses of wonderful color, all shades of pink, all over the prairie. And the sweetest roses that ever bloomed. (You are their namesake, my dear.)” (83). Given both the name of her daughter and the sentimental nickname, it is reasonable to conclude Wilder is indeed addressing Rose Wilder Lane.31 Finally, Wilder again addresses “you” in the final pages of her manuscript as she describes her wedding dress in great detail:

31 In The First Four Years, Wilder discusses the naming of her future daughter shortly after her pregnancy is confirmed by her doctor: “when wild rose time came in June [Laura] was able to ride behind Skip and Barnum along the country roads where the prairie roses on their low bushes made glowing masses of color from pale pink to deepest red and the air was full of their sweetness. On one such drive she asked abruptly out of a silence, “What shall we name the child?” “We can’t name it now,” Manly replied, “for we don’t know if it will be a boy or a girl.” And after another silence Laura said, “It will be a girl and we will name her Rose” (47-48).
Ma and I made my wedding dress of black cashmere, a tight fitting basque, painted at the bottom front and back, lined and boned with a high collar and plain sleeves rather full at the top, also lined. There was a shirring around the front of each armhole making a fullness over the breast that was taken up by the darts below and it was buttoned straight down the front with imitation jet buttons. The skirt was long just escaping the floor as it stood straight. It was plain at the top and good so it was full at the bottom. It was lined throughout with crinoline from the bottom to as high as my knees. (You know the dress. It was still my best dress when we came to Missouri). (109)

As Wilder, along with her husband, Almanzo, and daughter, Lane, moved to Missouri in 1894 (nine years after her marriage), it is again a solid indicator that Wilder addresses her daughter in this passage as well.32 As there is already a multitude of evidence to suggest that Wilder used Lane's writing experience in some professional capacity with “Pioneer Girl” as well as other works, it seems reasonable to conclude that “Pioneer Girl” was written with the knowledge Lane would be one of its first viewers, and perhaps for her eyes alone.

Yet, there are other instances in the work that trouble the assumption that the text has a singular audience and thus contains a fixed identity. To begin with, Wilder’s elaborate description of her wedding dress is extremely detailed, and unnecessary if it is intended solely for one who can recall the dress without any reminding. While it can be argued that the “you” remarks are all asides to Rose for the purpose of guiding her in her work as editor, it is then noteworthy that Wilder includes anecdotes not meant for publication. On the sixth page of

32 As an adult, Lane wrote her remembrance of the night before she and her parents began the trek from De Smet, South Dakota, to Mansfield, Missouri. “Ma” and “Pa” invited them over for dinner, and they all wore their best clothing for the occasion. Rose notes, “Mama wore her black merino wedding dress, with the jet buttons twinkling all down the front of the bodice” (Sampler 66).
Wilder's manuscript (technically written on the back of the fifth page, depending on one's viewpoint), there is a story of Pa riding one of his horses, Patty, and becoming surrounded by a large pack of wolves. While both the animal and its rider were vastly outnumbered and could easily have succumbed to an attack, the animals remain uninterested and Pa and Patty are able to return home safely. The story is preceded by two “x’s” and a label in the top margin of the page “Not to be used”:

Fig. 9: “Not to be used.”

While it is unclear exactly how this anecdote is “not to be used,” the fact that it is marked as such suggests that the rest of the “Pioneer Girl” manuscript is meant to be engaged with as part of an unnamed performance. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that, despite Wilder’s label, this incident is both repeated and elaborated on during a chapter entitled “The Wolf Pack” within Little House on the Prairie, thus contradicting her own earlier verdict of forbidding its further usage. While her reasons for this change are unknown, it is helpful to note that, in 1936, during a series of letters between Wilder and Lane discussing the construction of On the Banks of Plum Creek, Wilder gives Lane permission to alter the narrative as she sees fit. Typical of Wilder’s multiple statements that praise Lane’s expertise and her superior judgment is the following: “I thank you for suggestions on any mistakes. I know there are many […] I have written you the
whys of the story as I wrote it. But you know your judgment is better than mine, so what you decide is the one that stands” (14). As Lane also took the manuscript for “Pioneer Girl” and both transcribed and edited the text before submitting it to various publishers, it is possible that she was granted similar poetic license in this capacity. This suggests that “Pioneer Girl” is a malleable, living text, open to change and growth. Thus, whether under Wilder's eye, Lane's command of editing, or some other publication goals, the narrative is not considered a fixed entity.

Furthermore, there is one more anecdote within “Pioneer Girl” that is doubly marked, physically outlined in a square and labeled with the word “private,” Wilder writes: “And then we caught the itch at school and couldn’t touch the baby. Gosh how it did itch and Ma rubbed us with sulphur and grease and turned us before the fire to heat it in. We had an awful time” (28).

Interestingly, this short anecdote is one of a very small number of stories that directly address the body and bodily functions, and is also the only one that potentially invites social stigma.

As noted in Chapter Three, Wilder does not ever discuss sexuality, details of childbirth, daily bodily functions, or any related topic in a direct manner, which was a writing practice typical for the time period. Crucially, the lack of discussion regarding the functions of female
bodies is not restricted to the page, but is an embodiment of larger social attitudes and cultural practices. In her book, *The Female Frontier: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairie and on the Plains*, Glenda Riley scrutinizes the role patriarchy plays on the mental and physical states of pioneering women in the later half of the nineteenth century. She states that the general “acceptance” of women’s inferiority to men resulted in the expectation that bodily pain and weakness were an inherent condition of womanhood:

Rather, female ailments, complaints, weaknesses, diseases, and problems, as they were called, were widely accepted as part of woman’s lot in life. As a result of such attitudes and beliefs, prairie women obtained little reliable information regarding birth control, abortion, and “female” ailments. When they did approach a medical practitioner with their ills, they might be examined discreetly, swathed in a gown, or be asked to describe their complaints, using a small female doll, rather than their own bodies, to do so. Treatment routinely included the cauterization of the womb with a hot poker, or even a clitoridectomy. (50)

While Wilder certainly never discusses birth control or abortion, she describes the birth of her daughter in *The First Four Years* in mostly poetic terms without using the words “pregnancy,” “labor” or “delivery,” and needs outside help recognizing that she “was going to have a baby” (46). In “Pioneer Girl,” the multiple births are noted by saying the babies were “found,” or that they “came,” thus divorcing them from the bodies of their mothers.

While Wilder is generally a follower of socially-accepted practices in this regard, it is still notable that she includes this one detailed anecdote within “Pioneer Girl,” drawing attention

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33 Later in *The First Four Years*, Wilder briefly describes her pregnancy and birth of an unnamed son in euphemistic terms. About a month after the birth, she notes his sickness and death with three sentences: “Laura was doing her own work again one day three weeks later when the baby was taken with spasms, and he died so quickly that the doctor was too late. To Laura, the days that followed were mercifully blurred. Her feelings were numbed and she only wanted to rest-to rest and not to think” (127).
to its status in the form of the square and label. Importantly, despite the fact that it is physically closed off and “protected” from the rest of the document, it is nonetheless written, and therefore no longer private to any spectator of the text, including Lane. I propose reading this portion of the text not merely as a marker for the author’s feelings, but also as a performance of the oppression of the female body. On one hand, the square and label physically represent the isolation women may feel at being taught that their bodies are weak and unimportant, and not worth personal attention and discussion. However, despite the sexism of patriarchy, the female body does not disappear, and Wilder’s small act of writing attests to the power of claiming visibility for oneself; although it may be labeled “private,” her body still exits. Thus, the binary of public and private consumption becomes troubled. Again, the deliberate disparity of writing the private and things that “shouldn't be read” point to the fact that “Pioneer Girl” cannot be pinned down, and may be read as in constantly in process. In this sense, it is an exemplar of Cixous’s performance of feminine writing.

In her description of feminine writing, Cixous produces an incongruity when she insists on a physical female body while noting that the concept of femininity is also a metaphor/signifier, available to men. The refusal to seamlessly reconcile the two concepts is a stand against essentialization and the quest for fixed meaning as privileged in phallocentrism. As such, Cixous does not offer a stringent framework of what feminine writing should look like, but instead emphasizes a kind of poetic discourse that plays with language, that allows for writing to exist as a body and a construction of self, and invites different permutations of both authorship and readership. For me, this same quality of irreconcilability is performed within the structure and function of “Pioneer Girl.” As Wilder presents equally “truthful” texts but with contradictory information, mixes historical fact with poetic imagery and heightened dialogue,
and is simultaneously inclusive and exclusive with multiple references to different types of spectatorship, Wilder participates in a feminine paradigm that refutes essentialization and encourages a multi-faceted identity. As the manuscript of “Pioneer Girl” invites numerous interpretations and numerous audiences, there are greater opportunities for performances of feminine writing.

**A Work in Progress**

While “Pioneer Girl” maintains a semblance of linearity as it largely follows a chronology of events according to Wilder’s age, the seamless progression of the work is disrupted by additions and asides made by Wilder as she re-thinks and re-visits areas of the text, marking it largely as a continual “work in progress.” Here, I examine those notes and added stories, and explore their ability to contribute to the idea of “Pioneer Girl” as performing and promoting a state of growth. There are multiple pieces of evidence to suggest Wilder’s conceptualization of drafting and process of thought in the construction of “Pioneer Girl,” the most obvious of which are the notes attached to the cover of the six original notebooks containing the manuscript. While I admittedly only have access to a scanned, microfilm copy, the quality is clear enough to reveal a small square of paper that has been attached to the familiar “50 cent tablet” that Wilder originally wrote out most of her works on. Each of these six “notes” primarily tracks the migratory process of the Ingalls family, as well as outlines some major events in each section. In fact, the notes attached to notebooks 1, 4, 5, and 6 are devoted entirely to the material’s connection with the published “Little House” books: “Indian Territory to Plum Creek” (1), “Seems to be Long Winter and The Little Town on the Prairie” (70), “Last part of Little Town on the Prairie and first of These Happy Golden Years” (90), and “These Happy
Golden Years” (100). While seemingly innocuous, the alignment with the published titles reveals that Wilder consulted “Pioneer Girl” after the publishing of the original series. As Wilder has elsewhere stated that she wrote, in part, to preserve the her father’s stories and the life she led without an eye to their future commercial success, it would seem odd that she had the foresight to divide “Pioneer Girl” into eight books complete with titles. In addition, the working titles of at least two of her books changed only during processes of publication: an early draft of Little House in the Big Woods was originally When Grandma Was A Little Girl and it was late in the editing process that the word “long” was replaced as the adjective in The Hard Winter. Significantly, the switch to “long” was made at the request of the publisher, as they felt the word “hard” would send an unsuitable message to children about the occasional bleakness of survival. Thus, the organization and timeline of the published works suggests Wilder continued to visit “Pioneer Girl” beyond the period of its inception, and subsequently continued to value its “unfinished” state; the added notes literally embody markers of age as the document is revisited, and thus acquires new layers of meaning.

Furthermore, the notes accompanying the covers of notebooks 1, 3, and 4 not only reveal continued interest in their contents, but also help to outline “Laura’s” burgeoning identity and note what was of value to Wilder. Notebook 2’s note reads: “Mary and ‘I’ featured in this – ‘I’ from 7 to 13 yrs. Moved to Burr Oak, Ia. Where Pa ran a hotel for a time – Moved to Walnut Grove. A lot about school and teachers and friends in school. Little Brother born. Grace born” (27).
Most significant here is the use of “I” surrounded by quotation marks, as it not only reveals an awareness of subjectivity and construction of the self, but also an expanded notion of the self. As noted earlier by Miller, most scholars refer to the figure in the “Little House” series as the “fictional” Laura, but the person who appears in this true-yet-poeticized work is neither fictional nor a fully autobiographical reality. Marvin Carlson speaks to this phenomenon in noting that, as humans continually repeat behaviors, it is possible to view everything as a performance, thus reducing its efficacy. In his book, *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, Carlson states, “the difference between doing and performing, according to this way of thinking, would seem to be not in the frame of theatre versus real life but in an attitude – we may do actions unthinkably, but when we think about them, this introduces a consciousness that gives them the quality of performance” (4). Wilder’s pointed use of quotations surrounding the duality of her repeated, childhood identity, literally and figuratively replicates a deliberate embodiment of the performance of her identity. The “I” is a heightened, performing self, and the fact that
Wilder claims her (instead of simply referring to her as “Laura”) shows an understanding an acceptance of the porous boundaries of the performance space; she can write as a sixty-year old yet also perform her ten-year old self at the same time.

Wilder's highlighting of “I” may also signify her ownership of the material as a worthwhile personal narrative, connected to her sense of self. The fact that she uses the word “feature” in reference to herself and Mary both locates and privileges the centrality of the two within the structure of the narrative. Here, Wilder also calls attention to the perceived spectatorship of the piece, and the connection a reader might feel as they read about “I.” In allowing her own experiences to sit at the forefront of her narrative, she is suggesting that they hold value for both herself and others. Adrienne Rich articulates the importance of women to revisit the language and writing that has defined their identities, so that they may start the processes of their recreation and serve as a foundational example for other women to come. She argues:

Re-vision - the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction-is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival […] And this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us; and how we can begin to see-and therefore live-afresh. (18)
As Wilder writes her personal narrative as revolving around her growing sense of maturity and construction of her / I self, she participates in relegating women's experience away from the margins of society.

In addition, the general discourse in these notes calls attention to the continual process of her growth and the value of building community. The note attached to notebook 3 reads: “Mary becomes blind. Family moved to construction camp beyond Tracy then move to Silver Lake – Settling De Smet – Church Organized. (The Shores of Silver Lake)” (Page 49). Here, Wilder describes both micro and macro developments in her world; “I” / Laura continues to grow chronologically, siblings are added to the Ingalls family, and they then relocate various times in a process that includes building homes, participating in the development of railroad camps, settling a new town and constructing a church. Here, Wilder not only describes the birth and growth of a new community, but also her contribution to the process of its “becoming.” On a literal level, Wilder’s role in the development of De Smet destabilizes the patriarchal notion that women were incapable of participating in important, public work. Yet, symbolically, the fact that she continues to contribute to the growth of “Pioneer Girl” even after the publication of the “Little House” series mirroring the process of transformation in both self and world.

As Wilder re-visits and re-organizes the physical notes/labels she affixed to “Pioneer Girl,” she also revisited its content, thus, introduces another possible reading of the document. There are well over a dozen instances in which the major narrative breaks in favor of added details, sentences, and stories that were clearly added after the original writing. Designated by an “X” accompanied by a note proclaiming “on back of page” (which is also notable as Wilder generally did not write on the backs of pages), a line pointing to a scribbling in margins where the space is generally left blank, and numerous small instances where words or sentences have
been crossed out with replacements scrunched in available blank space all aid in physically indicating a re-vision of the text. These overt edits/additions work on multiple levels in contributing to “Pioneer Girl” as a burgeoning feminist/feminine text for the way they disrupt traditional, linear modes of reading and writing. Most of Wilder's “added” stories are related to a theme she has been discussing, but are not directly relevant to an exact event she is writing about, and found on the backs of pages.

While these “disruptions” perform a more cyclical mode of thinking on Wilder’s part, they force the reader to identify with the text along thematic lines, as well. In the microfilm, archival manuscript which I used as the model for my transcription, the back of the page is represented as an actual page unto itself. Often times I have been reading a page that ends mid-sentence and find that, while the page immediately following is a completely different story, the page after that picks up where the original sentence left off. The effect it has on me as a reader is to force me to rethink the way I value accepted notions of storytelling, and to acknowledge more cyclical modes of thought. Typical of this writing style comes near the end of Wilder's fourth notebook of the “Pioneer Girl” manuscript. The majority of Wilder's pages 255-256 deal with the transition of late summer into autumn. There are summarized accounts of the Ingalls family’s preparations to send Mary to the College for the Blind in Vinton, Iowa; the week-long trip Ma and Pa make to send Mary off to college while the other children are left to tend house, Laura and Carrie’s adventures beginning a new school year, and an erratic encounter with a bull during a walk home. At the bottom of page 256, Wilder writes, “One night, going home, we saw him beside the road and went for to one side, and into the Big Slough on a path we followed until the tall grass was away above our heads so we could not…” While, originally, the sentence most likely ended on the next notebook page (“…be sure just where we were coming out.”), the
addition of the following anecdote on the back of page 256 alters the shape of the narrative:

In hunting for something a few days after Pa and Ma came home, I found where Ma had hidden it a beautiful book of Scotch poems. Because it was hidden, I knew I was not expected to know about it and so said nothing. It was awfully hard to leave it alone but I did. Ma gave it to me for my Christmas present. She had brought it from Vinton, Iowa, for me.

Fig. 12: Added story of the book of Scotch poems.
The fact that this anecdote interrupts a sentence – combined with the realization that it is written on the back of a page - suggests that it was written after the initial writing of “Pioneer Girl.” Although it is unknown if its late addition to the text is due to purposeful placement or a late, returning memory, it is worth noting that this incident is expanded and touched on in two chapters of *Little Town on the Prairie.* This is a notable experience because, although the finding of the book - which was obviously meant to be a Christmas gift - was unintentional, the decision not to reveal what she is discovered is deliberate, and the first time Laura “keeps” something from her parents. Laura reasons, “If she confessed to Ma, she would spoil their Christmas pleasure, that they were looking forward to […] Never before had she kept a guilty secret from Ma, but now she did not say a word” (141-142). This moment marks one of the first times Laura goes against the strict rules of what constitutes good behavior, trusting instead in her own abilities to judge and react to situations, thus noting her process of maturation and burgeoning subjecthood. The fact that later receives pointed attention in the published series suggests Wilder considers the process of re-visiting and re-writing her life narrative to be valuable.

As stated earlier in this chapter, while it is perhaps common knowledge to equate a “draft” with being “unfinished” and therefore undesirable, I suggest that reading works such as “Pioneer Girl” may serve to highlight and heighten the reader / spectator's relationship with the work. In his essay about reading and organizing encyclopedia entries, Dennis Kennedy argues that the reader participates in meaning making in the very way she chooses, utilizes, and analyzes encyclopedic cross references. He notes, “the adventure represents a more active intellectual participation on your part, not only because you have been given the freedom to fill in the inevitable gaps but also because you are almost forced to construct a history of your own
in so doing‖ (34). Thus, as the reader must choose from different ways of experiencing “Pioneer Girl” via the multitude of added stories and details, they are constructing a way of knowing that may also performatively mirror Wilder's own process of growth and maturation; in turning the pages of the text shown above, she experiences first disorientation, then reclamation as she figures out the thematic link between the three pages of related story. Whether encountering the above anecdote within the microfilm copy of the “Pioneer Girl” manuscript or (if one was lucky and careful enough) within the original, handwritten notebooks, the reader would still need to make an active decision upon finishing the half-sentence at the bottom of page 256 - either finish it on the next page and then go back and read the back of page 256, or to stop in the middle of the sentence, read the back page, and then finish the end of said sentence. In both instances, there is a disruption of linear storytelling in that the reader must move back and forth from two incongruous moments: walking through the Big Slough and getting lost, and discovering a premature gift bought during the previously-discussed trip Vinton, Iowa. Yet, a thematic connection is highlighted as, in both events, Wilder is forced to navigate unknown territory, both physical and moral. As the reader and Wilder negotiate different / new ways of knowing, both participate in a transforming experience. As Mary Jacobus observes: “We might go further and say that in constituting woman as our object when we read, we not only read in gender, but constitute ourselves as readers” (945).

**Constructing Subjectivity and Audience**

In 1932 critic Claire Nolte of the Los Angeles County Free Library wrote a review of *Little House in the Big Woods*: 
I read Little House in the Big Woods, and found it absorbingly interesting. Boys and girls whose grandfathers and grandmothers might wax reminiscent while reading the book aloud, ought to delight in it. Children anywhere should find the story of Laura and Mary and sister Carrie equally absorbing. We have so few simple books of pioneer life for younger children, that to discover one as sincere and straightforward as Mrs. Wilder’s is a real find. (Reception)

For Nolte, the experience of reading produces audiences of both grandparents and children; while the former may relate to Wilder’s shared specificities from daily life in the nineteenth century, the later will easily emphasize with the perceived universal feelings of viewing the world with young eyes. Furthermore, the book is able to induce these audiences to perform and reinforce their identities, as the grandparents will be inspired to “wax reminiscent,” in the presence of their grandchildren, and providing each party with confidence and security with the way they experience the world.

This construction is not particularly surprising, given the fact that the book’s original title was When Grandma Was a Little Girl, which simultaneously connects both groups. Moreover, the opening lines of Little House in the Big Woods allude to multi-generational audiencing:

Once upon a time, sixty years ago, a little girl lived in the Big Woods of Wisconsin, in a little gray house made of logs. The great dark trees of the Big Woods stood all around the house, and beyond them were other trees and beyond them were more trees […] The little girl was named Laura and she called her father, Pa, and her mother, Ma. In those days and in that place, children did not say Father and Mother, nor Mamma and Papa, as they do now” (1-3).
The text concentrates on building a continual divide to the past; for anyone who engages in reading the text, there will always be a separation of time from the Big Woods of “sixty years ago.” Holly Blackford, discussing the divide from contemporary time, observes that “The first line of the novel announces that fairy tale takes precedence over historical specificity” (148). The opening sentence of the next book in the series to feature the Ingalls family, *Little House on the Prairie*, showcases a similar sentiment: “A long time ago, when all the grandfathers and grandmothers of today were little boys and little girls or very small babies, or perhaps not even born, Pa and Ma and Mary and Laura and Baby Carrie left their little house in the Big Woods of Wisconsin” (1). Here, the text produces a similar time of long ago, a place where only the sentimental and weathered may inhabit.

Yet, despite the pointed references to grandparents and the previous title to *Little House in the Big Woods*, it is interesting to note that Laura Ingalls Wilder, herself, never technically played the role of reminiscent grandmother; her surviving child, Rose Wilder Lane, had one known pregnancy, which resulted in a stillborn birth.34 This same naming structure is generally adhered to throughout the beginning of “Pioneer Girl,” as well. Yet, despite Wilder’s published admonishment that only “Pa” and “Ma” are to be used, she begins to use “father” interchangeably. On her eighteenth, handwritten notebook page, she writes, “Father went away one morning with the horses and wagon and came back at night with a load of fish. The wagon box was full and some of them were so long the [sic] more than reached across the wagon box. Father had been to Lake Pepin” (7, emphasis added). In addition, “Father” is deliberately crossed out with the word “Pa” written above it.

34 Curiously, Wilder was the only one out of her four sisters to have borne any children (Carrie did have two step-children), a statistic unusual for the time period. Sadly, Caroline Ingalls, Laura Ingalls Wilder, and Rose Wilder Lane all share the experience of giving birth to a male child that died at or shortly after birth. Charles Frederick Ingalls, the only one to be named, died around nine months old in 1876.
The act of physically remaking “father’s” identity into “Pa” is done repeatedly throughout the text; unexplainably, however, Wilder chooses to let many instances of “father” remain intact, as shown in the above quote. Finally, in Wilder’s second published work, Farmer Boy (which describes Almanzo Wilder’s childhood), Almanzo’s parents are always referred to as “Father” and “Mother,” despite the fact that the “published” Almanzo is six years older than Laura and the historical Almanzo was born a full ten years earlier than Wilder in 1857, during which time such monikers as “Pa” were not popular.

While these discrepancies may serve as ammunition for those who wish to view Wilder’s works within a binary of fiction and non-fiction, I suggest they are indicative of the fluidity of identity and the agency of auto-biographically-based performance. Judith Hamera states that
“Performance and performativity, however, proceed from the premise that culture, and the myriad acts of daily poesis that produce it, are always already in motion: memory is continually produced in ongoing dances between there and then, here and now; places are created out of spaces; artifacts become animated through consumption” (62). As the identity of Wilder-as-Writer mingles with her identity of Laura-as-Young-Lady, her writing performs the appropriate cultural labels for Charles Ingalls at both corresponding ages: “Pa” was popular in the nineteenth century and “father” is in the twentieth. In focusing on fact the people and culture are in a constant state of flux, the performance event becomes a space where embodiment is indicative of the truth of the moment. Thus, as Wilder is a teller of stories to children and is witness to an age no longer in the present, she claims the activities of the “Grandma” and thus performs her identity as well. Similarly, Wilder’s attribution of the titles of “father” and “mother” to Almanzo’s parents could be indicative of her desire to set them apart from her own Pa and Ma, or perhaps a tactic to make them seem for “modern” in spite of their age difference. Moreover, as she writes “Pioneer Girl” (and all the published works that succeed it) in the time of fathers and mothers, her own use of the terms are not grossly displaced; instead, the document is a performing testament to the memory and life of the author, and a source of identification for readers who follow her.

Perhaps the most notable difference between the published “Little House” series and “Pioneer Girl” is the point of view of the narrative; for while the former utilizes a third-person, omniscient format (Laura), the later employs the first-person (I). While I cannot authoritatively speak to Wilder’s motivations in her narrative point of view, I can offer that the effect of the changing discourse accomplishes more than a logistic change in pronouns. While the third-person “Laura” feels removed from both the reader and, at times, her own actions, “I” reveals
defiant ownership of a subjective viewpoint. From the standpoint of feminist historiography, for a woman to engage in claiming an autonomous identity within a patriarchal structure is a radical act. As Linda Alcoff argues, “the very subjectivity (or subjective experience of being a woman) and the very identity of women is constituted by women's position […] she herself is part of the historicized, fluid movement, and she therefore actively contributes to the context within which her position can be delineated” (349). When Wilder acknowledges herself as “I” she participates in the formation of her ontology.

The fluid oscillation between “I” and “Laura” is repeatedly emphasized in a handful of letters between Wilder and Rose Wilder Lane in mid 1936. Lane, who worked as Wilder’s editor on most of the published series, was in Columbia, Missouri; one hundred sixty miles from the writing desk at Rocky Ridge farm in Mansfield, where Wilder preferred to write. Thus, when Wilder required assistance with her draft for *By the Banks of Plum Creek*, the two used written correspondence to hash out details regarding character, structure and plot. While my study concentrates on “Pioneer Girl,” as opposed to the published series, these letters discuss subjectivity and the process of writing in a manner that both highlights and parallels that in “Pioneer Girl.” As Wilder first introduces herself in “Pioneer Girl” as both distanced from and engaged with the action, the small batch of letters heightens this dichotomous relationship. Within the first letter, which includes a detailed map of Plum Creek and the connected town of Walnut Grove, Wilder seamlessly blends pronouns and points of view, simultaneously effecting the reader’s relationship to the text. She describes:

35 The extent to which Lane may have edited, co-authored, or even ghost written the published “Little House” series is a current topic of interest among Wilder scholars and “Little House” lovers alike. As my study focuses on the original draft of “Pioneer Girl” (to my knowledge, the only other version is a later, type-written and edited version done by Lane) and a few letters and articles whose authorship remains unquestioned and will most likely continue in that vein, I will not be fully addressing this “controversy” here. Instead, my aim is to investigate the continual performance described within and ascribed to the text. For a more in-depth study of the possibilities of a Wilder/Lane publicized collaboration, see the works of John E. Miller and Anita Clair Fellman.
Laura and Mary were scared and lonesome and whenever they listened they could hear the creek roaring. That made them more lonesome for every thing else was so hushed. 3) This was and is prairie country. The high bank was a gentle swell and not so terribly high, if you figure that W dugout at 8 ft high and five steps from it down to the plank which would not have been so far above the water. Get the hills and our gorge out of your mind. The character of the place was altogether different. I was only six in the dugout and my memories of the exact turns of the creek are rather vague but I am sure this is near. (1)

Fig. 14: A drawing of Plum Creek.

Within the space of a few sentences, there is a gradual switch from the author’s definitive detachment from “Laura and Mary,” to neutral yet detailed descriptions of the dugout and creek, to the sudden admission that these features are, in fact, the products of the author’s personal (“I”) recollections.

Furthermore, this switch in subjectivity is not an isolated incident, but is found throughout the collaborative letters. Often occurring within the space of a few sentences, the
frequency and seamlessness of the switch is such that it becomes her convention. In the following sentences Wilder begins by discussing her memories in the present tense, and then moves directly to a suggestion for how the plotline should be adjusted due to her failure to recall how certain items became possessions of the Ingalls family. Wilder writes, “I don’t know where the china dog and the clock came from. Have Pa bring them from town. It shows an advance in home furnishing” (6). Here, Wilder’s letter moves from a direct statement of personal memory, to an immediate concern with the literary Pa and what types of meaning the published text might produce. Sheri Benstock expands on the phenomenon of constant changes in perspective, stating that

This conception of the autobiographical rests on a firm belief in the conscious control of artist over subject matter […] And it is not surprising that those who question such authority are those who are expected to submit to it, those who line up on the other side of the sexual divide—that is, women. The self that would reside at the center of the text is decentered—and often is absent altogether—in women’s autobiographical texts. (1047)

Notably, Wilder and Lane never address (either or indirectly) the continual changes in outlook. Whether this is because of ignorance or nonchalance due to the focused attention on the structure and content of the forthcoming On the Banks of Plum Creek does not matter. What is clear is that Wilder and Lane had more pressing concerns than deliberately crafting the subjective experience within their letters; if the opposite had been true, it seems reasonable to assume that topic would have existed somewhere within the content of their correspondence. I believe Wilder and Lane’s tendency towards the constant shifting of perspective within their letters successfully performs Benstock’s theory of the decentered text. To me, the shifts are not random
and tangential, but are connected by the connective threads of memory and intent of storyline. As stated above, the question of origin regarding the china dog and clock came from a letter from Lane; in its return, Wilder introduces a natural progression when she states that she cannot recall, and then extends the thought to the problem of how that absence may be portrayed in the published work. While I do not contend that Wilder and Lane are consciously looking to critique and subvert an andocentric structure of language and writing, I maintain that there is no overt attempt to produce a singular, authoritative voice throughout these letters. Again, as these shifts trouble the divide between the fictional, historical, and embodied memories that constitute the various versions of “Laura,” I argue they present a literal manifestation of a decentered self.

Earlier in this chapter, I noted John E. Miller’s often-repeated cautionary advice that one “should not equate the fictional Laura with the real person.” In the sense that identities are constantly in motion and in the knowledge that any given reader may interpret her writing in a different manner, I agree that one should not automatically meld the two personas into one complete, fixed being. Yet, I disagree with positioning the two identities as opposing ends of a binary, as well as the ensuing tendency to designate Wilder’s writing as largely fictional. In her letters to Lane, Wilder constantly refutes the notion that events in her life fit neatly into the categories of “real” and “not real.” A typical example follows in a description of early life at Plum Creek:

I have an awful suspicion that we drank (40) plain creek water, in the raw, without boiling or whatever. But that would make the reader think we were dirty, which we were not. So I said a spring. There could have been a spring near where Pa watered the oxen or there could be one near the plank footbridge. As it is located in my imagination, you may put it where it is most convenient. (11-12)
Here, Wilder privileges emotional truth over historical fact. For her, it is more important for spectators to experience Wilder’s sense of cleanliness and well being, than to instigate the social stigma that would attach itself to the Ingalls family, not to mention infatuation with health risks involved in drinking “dirty” water. As she gives up the geographical truth of the “plain creek water,” she offers a new terrain in its place: the space of her imagination. This bold assertion uncovers a strong sense of agency in constructing both her identity and in valuing the role of the audience.

In her essay, “Constructing the Subject,” Catherine Belsey discusses the need for feminist textual analysis to adopt practices akin to post-structuralism’s goals of destabilization. While advocating for the reader’s ability to interpret a text in relation to her own subjectivity, Belsey describes the deconstructive process that frees the text from absolute notions of meaning. She explains:

The object of deconstructing the text is to examine the *process of its production* - not the private experience of the individual author, but the mode of production, the materials and their arrangement in the work. The aim is to locate the point of contradiction within the text, the point at which it transgresses the limits within which it is constructed, breaks free of the constraints imposed by its own realist form. Composed of contradictions, the text is no longer restricted to a single, harmonious and authoritative reading. Instead it becomes *plural*, open to rereading, no longer an object for passive consumption but an object of work by the reader to produce meaning. (601)

Borrowing from Roland Barthes’s notion that “the death of the author is the birth of the reader,” Belsey calls for the reader to actively participate in expanding the significance of the text; in
doing so, she is simultaneously enriching the text’s potential and affirming the agency and value of the reader’s own subjectivity and knowledge. Barthes tells us that the modern scriptor “is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the text [...] there is no other time than that of enunciation and every text that is eternally written here and now” (1468). Thus, the moment of engagement is a performance between text and reader, and a liminal space is created where growth is encouraged to occur. In order to foster an environment where such a performance may be created, I offer a reading of Wilder texts where the possibility of highlighting Belsey’s “contradictions” remains high. Using a short anecdote from “Pioneer Girl,” I track its development through the batch of letters discussing its role in a novel, to the published material within On the Banks of Plum Creek. A comparative analysis between all three (presented in chronological order) illustrates the literal and figurative process of creation that a text undergoes, allowing for multiple performances of meaning.

As “Pioneer Girl” encapsulates Wilder’s childhood through to her marriage at eighteen years, her manuscript necessarily includes summaries of anecdotes that are short on details, which are later elaborated on in the published series. The following passage occurs while the Ingalls family is living near Walnut Grove, Minnesota; Wilder is approximately seven years old while Mary is nine and Carrie four. Following a lengthy description of swiftly developing blizzards, Ma and Pa uncharacteristically decide to leave the children at home while they walk the few miles into town. Although it is a calm day and early in the season for inclement weather, the inevitable happens:

Watching for them we saw the long, low cloud in (69) the west and watched it climb up toward the sun while there still was no sign of Pa and Ma. Then we remembered a tale of some children freezing to death in the house, while their
parents were away, because they had no fire. There was a big pile of wood a little way outside our door and we decided we wouldn’t freeze even if Pa and Ma couldn’t get home. So we carried in the wood armload after armload and piled it on the floor around the stove. Just as the first gust of wind from the blizzard hit us and the snow whirled in our faces we were carrying in the last armfuls of wood. And oh Joy! Pa and Ma burst out of the storm and in at the door with us.

(23)

Approximately six years later in the summer of 1936, Wilder developed the material for what would be her fourth book in the “Little House” series. In her first draft, she has Pa returning from “the east,” where he has been working during the harvesting season because a grasshopper infestation ruined the family’s chances of independent financial survival. The night he returns home he tells the story of the frozen children caught in a blizzard, as the next chapter highlights Laura, Mary, and Carrie alone during the fast snowfall. After sending the draft to Rose Wilder Lane, Lane wrote back to Wilder with the following observances:

I can not somehow make it reasonable, after Pa has walked 50 miles and just got home from being a long time away, that he would sit down and tell Laura about the children at home in the blizzard who chopped up all the furniture. It does not seem likely that just that story would come into his mind after a summer working in harvest fields. How about having one of the children, Laura’s school-chum, tell the story? [...] Laura’s idea of bringing in the wood would then be natural enough, and also utterly astonishing to Pa and Ma. (4)

Wilder then replies to Lane’s fears and suggestions, describing her motivation for placing the story of the ill-fated children at the tail end of Pa’s journey. She explains:
Pa’s idea in telling the story of bringing in the wood was that he must go early to bed to make a good start in the morning on his woodpile. That would bring the story to his mind. What really happened was that Ma read us the story out of something. I have no idea what. But I thought it would emphasize the need for haste in getting up the winter wood to have Pa tell it was I did […] Perhaps it would be all right to have Ma see the cloud and go to the stable before the blizzard struck, though we have had that description of the storm, when Laura and Mary carried in the wood. And I thought the suddenness of the storm striking so unexpectedly was more dramatic. (6 &10)

When *On the Banks of Plum Creek* is published in 1937, we see that an agreement has been reached regarding Wilder’s structure and Rose’s suggestions regarding clarity. The last page of the chapter detailing Pa’s return from the east involves a conversation about what household supplies have depleted in his absence and need replacement from the nearby town. When its agreed the trip can be made the following afternoon, Pa’s next remark follows the conversation smoothly and thus ends the chapter:

“Then I’d better get the wood up before we go to town,” said Pa. “I don’t like the sound of that wind, and they tell me that Minnesota blizzards come up fast and sudden. I heard of some folks that went to town and a blizzard came up so quickly they couldn’t get back. Their children at home burned all the furniture, but they froze stark stiff before the blizzard cleared up enough so the folks could get home.” (280-281)
The succeeding chapter, “Keeping House,” elaborates on Mary, Laura, and Carrie’s adventure while their parents spend the afternoon in town. Ten pages expounds on their time alone, the incoming blizzard, the rush to bring in too much wood, and Ma and Pa’s return:

They would have gone on quarreling, but suddenly there was no sunshine. They ran to look through the bedroom window. A dark cloud with a fleecy white underside was rolling fast from the north-west. Mary and Laura looked out the front window. Surely it was time for Pa and Ma to come, but they were nowhere in sight. “Maybe it’s a blizzard,” said Mary. “Like Pa told us about,” said Laura. They looked at each other through the gray air. They were thinking of those children who froze stark stiff. “The woodbox is empty,” said Laura. […] They forgot everything but bringing in the wood. (286-288)

This cross-section of sources provides an intimate look at the processes of development within Wilder texts. Much of the account in “Pioneer Girl” retains the same basic shape by the time it has morphed into the published piece, save for the obvious length (only a small portion of which is quoted above) and attention to thoroughness. Yet, it is only when the letters are presented in tandem with the other works that two glaring moments of “contradiction” reveal themselves. As shown in “Pioneer Girl,” the catalyst for Laura and Mary’s determination to move the woodpile into the house despite the potential dangers of the blizzard is the story of the children who froze to death. On the Banks of Plum Creek uses this information in the form of Pa’s stream-of-consciousness conversation when he muses on the his newfound time before he must go to town, and his sense of the impending inclement weather. Yet, in answer to Lane’s query, it is stated that Wilder’s memory attributes the warning story of the children to Ma, and not to Pa. Therefore, Wilder altered that detail for the published series. Furthermore, Lane’s
suggestion that Wilder switch the identity of the storyteller to a “school chum” is not taken, nor is Wilder’s possible idea of Ma seeing a storm cloud described in the same manner as what Mary and Laura see. As noted by Belsey, these ambiguous, irreconcilable moments produce multiple questions but provide no definitive answers: although it makes sense that we hear the story of the unlucky children directly before Ma and Pa go to town, there is no offered reason why it must be Pa who tells the story and not Ma. Why the switch between from Ma to Pa? What did the original draft look like? What aspects of the original draft prompted Lane to proclaim the progression from Pa’s long journey to the telling of the story nonsensical? As Wilder often changed her work based on Lane’s advice (as evidenced by the content in the other letters), why did Wilder’s original structure to remain intact in spite of Lane’s concerns? Ma goes to the barn many times throughout On the Banks of Plum Creek, so to what incidence was Wilder referring to? If Wilder proclaims that all her works are true, how is truth defined in these texts? Does dramatic/emotional truth contain more worth than that which lives in memory?

Ultimately, there is no means of positively identifying “correct” answers to any of these questions. For example, the change from Ma as the storyteller to Pa could be prompted by Wilder’s sudden recollection that it was not her mother’s story, but actually her father’s. Maybe Wilder wanted to showcase her father’s good judgment and rapport with getting advice from the townspeople. Perhaps she identified with her father more, and wanted readers to do the same. It’s conceivable that Wilder did not want to draw attention away from Pa after his long absence, and its possible she simply enjoyed the aesthetics with how she wrote the piece. The only certainty to be drawn is that there are multiple ways to view the text, and that each permutation the reader chooses to consider is as valid as the next.
As Wilder chooses to alter her memories of historical fact in favor of producing a thematic and poetic truth, she excuses herself from the bonds of andocentric writing. In discussing the non-traditional avenues many women have utilized to write their lives and express themselves publicly, Lynn C. Miller and Jacqueline Taylor rejoice in what they view as a breakdown of andocentric language and practices through a continual exposition of hierarchical and organizational power dynamics. They note:

One legacy of deconstruction remains that while the master narrative […] may be viewed skeptically as too white, too male, too privileged, the particular individual struggle, especially of those on the margins, retains its fascination. The direct communication of the personal between the writer or performer and the reader/spectator characterizes the genre. The very lack of pretense of objectivity conveys a sense of authenticity in a world where institutional authority is seen as questionable. (Constructed Self 169)

For Miller and Taylor, there is a cultural shift towards valuing narratives which eschew objectivity and authority, because they do not reflect the crisis of self-representation with which all “readers” must deal. In placing works such as “Pioneer Girl” and private letters on an equal plane with the published series within the Wilder canon, readers are granted power to experience Wilder through the lens of their own subjectivity, and to claim agency in their own experiencing of the text.
Auto / Ethnography

In 1953, Laura Ingalls Wilder recorded an audio greeting of thanks in response to a gift of figurines crafted to resemble members of her family:

I certainly do appreciate the gift of these quaint little figures that seemed to have walked out of my memories of long ago. But more than all I value the understanding and love for me and my family that prompted the gift [...] I am glad to have the opportunity of speaking to librarians and children of California, and proud that you are friends of mine. With thanks and love to you all, I am your Laura of the Little House books. (Laura Speaks)

While the overriding tone of Wilder’s message is one of gratitude, her appreciation extends beyond that of the gift. Significantly, she assigns greater worth to those qualities that motivated the artistic renderings of people close to her, the drive to send her letters on her birthday, and that led to the naming of a library in her honor: “understanding and love.” As stated in Chapter Two, Wilder names that same incentive to write about her life when she expresses that “I wanted children now to understand more about the beginnings of things” (LORE, emphasis mine). As the reader’s ability to understand Wilder and her childhood world is of primary importance to Wilder, her work may be designed with the goal of being read in mind. During the audio

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36 The six minutes of recorded conversation between Wilder and Docia Holland (as well as other tracks of instrumental music performed on Pa’s fiddle) can be purchased in an audio CD format, distributed by the Laura Ingalls Wilder Home Association under the title Laura Speaks. The following is my transcription of a portion of the introductory track. The script was written by William Anderson, with spoken narration by Eric Spyres: “Letters, honors, and awards poured in on the modest little lady who lived on Rocky Ridge Farm. None pleased her more than the birthday present she received from children and librarians from California. On her eighty-sixth birthday, February 7, 1953, a set of figures dressed in pioneer clothes arrived in her mail. They represented the Little House characters she had written about: Pa and Ma, Almanzo, Mary, Laura, Carrie, Grace, and the bulldog Jack. Laura appreciated her gift from California, but she decided to share it with the friends of her little Ozark hometown of Mansfield [Missouri]. A year earlier, the library had been named in her honor. Laura took the character figures to be displayed at the Laura Ingalls Wilder Library. They are still there on exhibit. Later, in 1953, Laura Ingalls Wilder sat down at the library in front of a tape recorder. With her was her friend, the Wright County librarian, Docia Holland. Together, they recorded a greeting to Laura’s reader friends in California. It turned out to be the only known recording of her voice” (Track 1).
recording, Wilder praises the creator of the eight figurines, noting their fidelity to the descriptions in her written work. She states, “Miss Brooks must be familiar with the stories, or she couldn’t have made the little figures so true to life.” The relationship is cyclical, as it is Miss Brooks’s deep knowledge of the characters that allows her to create the impression that they have “walked out of [Wilder’s] memories.” As a nod to the shared intimacy with Wilder’s work, Wilder allows for a connection between her self and those receiving the audio greeting. As they have proven their “understanding” of her texts and their relation to the truth of Wilder’s memory, Wilder rewards them with an acknowledgment of their command and subsequent ownership of the material: she is not merely a passive author or character but is now “your Laura.”

While the bulk of my study focuses on Wilder’s identity and her association with / in her texts, I have yet to undertake an exploration of the relationship between Wilder, text, and audience from the point of view of an outside audience member. As I have shown, the various crossed-out sentences, the structure of the occasional added phrase, and the alteration of handwritten words within “Pioneer Girl” are indicative of multiple viewings of the text. Thus, as Wilder revisits the text during an ongoing process of editing / drafting, she is simultaneously author, subject, and her own audience. Yet, while the physicality of writing and reading is a personal, private act, there is evidence that Wilder intended the information in “Pioneer Girl” to be shared with a public audience that wasn’t automatically familiar with the intimate details of her life. As Wilder pointedly and repeatedly uses the word “understanding” to articulate her goals for her reading audience, she sets up a paradigm that involves more than a simple reading of texts. As understanding implies a deep listening, comprehension, and digestion of material, I wish to end this chapter with an explanation of my own process of “understanding.” Borrowing
from qualitative and ethnographic approaches, I offer my own experiences in seeking to know Laura Ingalls Wilder in all her permutations.

Ethnography is an academic discipline that has evolved considerably over the last several decades. While there are many different types of ethnography, such as critical ethnography, new ethnography, interpretive ethnography, and autoethnography, they are all concerned with the doing and exploring of culture and engagement with the other. I do not believe the work I have done can be characterized as strict ethnography. Yet, I hold that I have utilized ethnographic methods under the larger umbrella of qualitative research as a tool in my exploration of Wilder culture, particularly in my “fieldwork” among the homesites and archival collections of Wilder, and in my conscious attempt to recognize my own role as a researcher.

In his book *Writing the New Ethnography*, J. L. Goodall, Jr. explores how the identity and experience of the ethnographer plays a part in constructing the equivalent in the studied other / culture. He states, “By new ethnographies, I mean creative narratives shaped out of a writer’s personal experiences within a culture and addressed to academic and public audiences” (9). For Goodall, both the ethnography and the role and process of the writer are regarded with equal importance. Because the ethnographer retains ultimate authority and voice in her inherent transcription of the culture of the other, it is possible that such a paradigm can reinforce hierarchal power structures or simply colonize what has been experienced.

As such, Goodall advocates the importance of reflexivity to counter such imbalance. Indeed, while Goodall describes many practical tips about the physical doing of ethnography, he spends a great portion of his book investigating tensions that define the relationship between writer and subject. He notes, “To become a writer in a genre called ethnography is a choice that

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37 By “fieldwork,” I mean my detailed, written observations and reflections about what I saw and experienced on the grounds of the homesites and during the pageant plays, as well as the process and recording of various interviews between myself and those who worked at and / or visited these sites.
more accurately finds you, and then defines you” (22). Here, the desire on the part of the writer not only shapes the written ethnography, but marks and reveals the very identity of the writer. For Goodall, then, it is imperative that the prospective ethnographer carefully track and investigate her motives and progress into the genre.

For me, the act of “knowing” Wilder has been a journey over twenty years in the making, beginning with the gift of *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, at age seven. While some critics lament the fact that the published series is too romantic a portrayal of family life and the pioneering west,38 I always loved the sense of familial security shared by the Ingalls. Perhaps because I moved many times during my childhood, I hung onto the series long after my seventh birthday, remembering the comfort it had given me and indulging in a quick re-reading whenever I needed a boost. For Little Nicole, Laura Ingalls Wilder meant safety and love.

Twenty years of wearing out my copies of the published series I find that I am still drawn to the series, and, as I have grown, am curious to know what Laura Ingalls Wilder means to me now. And so, one hot day in mid July, I find myself standing in front of the lake at the edge of Pepin, Wisconsin, next to the heart of what used to be the “Big Woods.” Where Laura was born. I have just spent the better part of an hour talking with Dave Smith39, the President of the local Laura Ingalls Wilder society, at his workshop, which provides an expansive view of Lake Pepin. At one point, he gestures to the water:

It’s funny because she described the lake when she actually came to Pepin in the wagon. She didn’t come the way that we would normally come today, she came down a long road, showed the lake all the way down to the foot of the lake so it would look much bigger to her at that time than it even is now and she described

38 See Chapter Two for further examination of Wilder and the pioneering movement.
39 All interviews conducted in conjunction with this dissertation / dissertation research were done by permission and in accordance with the Bowling Green State University Human Subject Review Board. See Appendix B.
it as looking so big. But it would have looked bigger to her if she entered Pepin

[…] As a child.

I am in my late twenties, also seeing the Lake – still filled with fish – for the first time. I walk down to its edge and look out; it is lovely and deep and blue-gray and my feet slide over sand and brush and small rocks. The words of the Little House in the Big Woods chapter “Going to Town” fill my head and seem to ring in my ears. Wilder’s impressions are well over one hundred years old, but the voice I hear is my own, eight years old, reading aloud to an attentive audience of stuffed animals:

Laura and Mary ran along the lake shore, picking up pretty pebbles that had been rolled back and forth by the waves until they were polished and smooth. There were no pebbles like that in the Big Woods. When she found a pretty one, Laura put it in her pocket, and there were so many, each prettier than the last, that she filled her pocket full […] But when Pa picked her up and put her in the wagon, a dreadful thing happened. The heavy pebbles tore her pocket right out of her dress […] Laura gathered up the pebbles, put them in her pocket, and carried the pocket in her lap. She did not mind very much when Pa laughed at her for being such a greedy little girl that she took more than she could carry away. (173-175)

I look around, and I am alone; I have been granted a private performance with the ghost of Laura and the horizon of Lake Pepin. For a moment, I’m Nicole / Laura as I bend down and survey the pretty pebbles on the beach. I pick one I like, and then another. Two is enough, I don’t want to be greedy. I carry them back to the car and put them in a bag. They are still smooth.
The same performance is carried out over the next two weeks as I make my way through the Midwest, literally following in the footsteps of the Ingalls family. I make stops in Burr Oak, Iowa; Spring Valley, Minnesota; Walnut Grove, Minnesota; De Smet, South Dakota; Independence, Kansas; and, finally, Mansfield, Missouri. I wade in Plum Creek, stamp the dirt on the spot of the dugout’s location, tour the Master’s Hotel and gaze at the bullet holes, walk through the old Surveyor’s House, touch the cover of Pa’s hand-dug well, and spend a quiet moment by Laura’s writing desk. I survey tall prairie grasses and straw, and feel the vastness of a flat landscape without trees. I know what Laura means when she talks about the open sky. In re-visiting the landscape of Laura’s life, my identity is influenced by her’s, and, in return, the traces / spaces of her identity are touched by mine.
In Elyse Lamm Pineau’s “Intimate Partners: A Critical Autobiography of Performing Anaïs,” she describes a deep, personal relationship between herself and Anaïs Nin. Although Pineau does not know Nin in the bodily sense, their work beginning after the death of Nin, something deeply intimate happens when the two converge on stage. Pineau tells us, “Generative autobiographical performance begets a generational line whose heritage is mingled from all the bodies of memory we have touched and incorporated into our own” (44). The very act of female bodily incorporation – a push and pull of identity exploration – echoes the feminine, rhythmic cycle of life, there is an organic and primal echoing in her piece that radiates and extends into the audience. While I am not utilizing Laura Ingalls Wilder to construct a solo performance in the traditional definition (yet), I do feel attached to her as I walk in her homesites, stand before her personal possessions, re-perform moments of her life. The physical journey of visitation is total of around two weeks.

Yet, when I return, the process of digesting all that I have experienced takes months. And, when my library receives the loaned microfilm that holds “Pioneer Girl,” I find that the process of transcription instantly transports me back to the homesites I have visited, the land I have interacted with, the Western Historical Manuscript Collection, and with Laura herself. As noted previously, it is a cold, microfilm copy: the negative space inverts to a black background in order to highlight the faint handwriting. It is hard to see. And my hands hurt. And it feels never ending. But, when I zoom in to scrutinize a sentence here, a turn of phrase there, I almost – almost – get a sense of what she was thinking. How she moves from topic to topic, just connecting the dots. I learn to recognize the distinctive way she writes her “p’s” and the ferocity with which she crosses out something inaccurate or that isn’t aesthetically pleasing. She never wastes space, writing in a practiced cursive up into the margins and into the space of her
heading. She physically marks those stories that showcase high moments of intensity, as if warning herself of their content. Or perhaps she is invoking protection against vulnerability. As I transcribe, I marvel at what she has written. That she has written, herself. It is a testament to the agency that women can claim in writing their lives.

In the history of performance and women’s studies, the world “tradition” is always inevitably synonymous with the patriarchy and patriarchal concerns. As Carver quotes Marilyn Frye, “The phallocentric scheme does not admit women as authors of perception” (Voices 15). In the same way that the base rules of grammar revert to “he” as the universal speaker,” the male figurehead is known throughout recorded history as dominant, both in ideals, presentation, and in projected audience. Yet, in recent years (and with the advent of various feminisms), the tide has begun to change. In defiance of the forced relegation of the female to the private spheres of life, women are making their lives known and there stories political through the act of performance. As Carver notes, the “‘I’ acknowledges that we can be subjects of our own stories;” in addition, it implies that the female solo performer does so bravely – using her corporeal body and feminine voice, she will command the attention of all those who watch her. As she tells her story, she simultaneously makes her story, and imprints herself on the annals of history/herstory, proclaiming the lopsidedness of a gendered recorded history that ignores half the population.

In De Smet, South Dakota, where Wilder spent the bulk of her teenage years and where four of the “Little House” books take place, there is a Laura Ingalls Wilder Museum that contains a small “warehouse” full of artifacts relating to Wilder and her family. Because I arrive under the label of “researching scholar,” the kind curator, Rachel Clendenin, takes me to the archival space, which is always locked and not subject to the general public. There are rows and rows of papers, articles of furniture, and boxes. I want to spend a year here, but I am lucky to get
twenty minutes. She points out Mary’s trunk, and she does not laugh when I ask if I can touch it. She then goes over to one shelf, takes out a long box, and carefully begins to unwrap a tiny velvet dress that belonged to Wilder. As she works, Clendenin muses:

I think that is what makes the story so important is that when [visitors] go into the Surveyor’s House they see Mary’s trunk, the big green animal book, that these people become human. They become flesh and blood; they are no longer characters but they are actual people just as real as we are, and I think that’s as important as any story and I think what makes it interesting. Well, I have a lot of people that come in and say, well, my grandparents have a story like that, and I think that is an important connection. That these are the every man stories of the prairie, they are the people that my grandparents were and anybody’s grandparents who were pioneers. That is who they were […] It wasn’t just a bunch of people in a covered wagon in some far off place, it was my grandparent’s story and my great grandparent’s story, who built this house and who had the struggles and lost the family and were able to keep it going and keep it together.

She holds out the dress to me. I touch the black, velvet cloth of the dress. It is small, worn, soft. It is lived in. The realization brings tears to my eyes.
Chapter 5
Conclusion

I believe that the various writings and performances of Laura Ingalls Wilder participate in Cixous’s activity of “writing herself” on multiple levels. As Cixous notes, feminine emancipation occurs when women begin to recognize their right to consider themselves the subjects of their lives, and to then put this awareness into practice:

Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement. (2039)

As noted throughout this dissertation, while Wilder’s work produces a solution for bringing women’s language and stories toward a public forum, she also works to trouble the constructed binary that women’s lives are relegated to the private realms of domesticity as men enjoy the freedom of the public. Thus, as we continue to live in a culture that has firm roots in andocentrism, it becomes increasingly necessary to find ways to combat all forms of feminine and sexual oppression, whether it is played out in/on the physical body, or in what has been traditionally privileged as masculine “evidence” of historical representation.

In this dissertation, I have used Wilder as an example of seeking out and privileging the feminine through an examination of her identity through non-traditional means. I have traced the construction of Wilder through historical context, lesser known documents, and the beginnings of an “autoethnography.” I’ve uncovered examples of her masculinity, and viewed multiple versions of truth as having equal value. Instead of using the “Little House” series as a primary reference point (as many others have done), I sought out “Pioneer Girl,” a handwritten work that
has yet to be published. My decision to do so is not to invalidate those sources that have been traditionally favored, but rather to add them in order to create opportunities for a more complex performance of Wilder. As I have previously noted, there are other works of Wilder’s that I could have chosen to focus attention on, including handwritten drafts of the published series and a couple short diaries which have already been published. In short, I believe that the identity of Wilder has multiple permutations yet to be explored. As such, I wish to offer one final section of this dissertation which communicates the simultaneous public / private-ness of feminine performance of identity, as well as exposes new areas of research for my continuing study. In this chapter, I present one avenue where future scholars may take my research, and summarize my findings and learning experiences following the completion of my research and analysis.

While my dissertation explores Wilder through various lenses, the primary observations and conclusions filter through one primary audience: myself. As such, I would like to present an explanation of Wilder that is centered not on Wilder’s self-awareness or my own theorizing, but on a larger audience interacting with and taking on Wilder’s identity. Thus, I offer another set of observations of a theatrical public both experiencing and making Wilder “their own,” and I utilize the pageant plays of Laura Ingalls Wilder materials in order to illustrate one model where female lives and representation may be historically unearthed and valued, publicized and also re-privatized. As the traditional form of the pageant reifies Jesus Christ as the binder of community, the function of a female personal narrative fulfilling the same relationship affirms the value of women and helps to insert their stories into history. Finally, the multitude of embodying forms of Laura Ingalls Wilder attests to the fact that the construction of the self is continually in progress. As the audience is encouraged to participate in and poetically construct who Wilder is, they are also free to experience and re-write, and empathize with her as they so
choose. The end of my chapter summarizes my findings throughout the dissertation, with an attempt to identify my own biases and expectations throughout the process, as well as my discoveries about my own process of empathy.

**Little Pageants on the Prairie**

Growing up in the last great thrust of the westward pioneering movement in the 1800s, Laura Ingalls Wilder realized she had a unique voice and life perspective to add to the historical narrative. Beginning with *Little House in the Big Woods* (1932), Wilder offers a personal narrative of her life that spans across eight books from ages three through eighteen, beginning with her first home in the Big Woods of Wisconsin and ending with her marriage to Almanzo Wilder in De Smet, South Dakota. While the last work was completed over sixty years ago, the series has remained immensely popular, inspiring a television show and a tourist industry for all artifacts and locations related to the “Little House.” The last few decades have seen the growth of what is known as “Little House Homesites:” in at least seven locations across six states, there now exist museums, reconstructed cabins, guided tours, and festivals to commemorate and sanctify the homes that the Ingalls family lived in. Many of these homesites have developed “pageant plays” based on the narrative of Wilder’s life during the time she spent in the particular space of each geographical location. As part of my dissertation research, I visited many of these homesites and attended Laura Ingalls Wilder festivals in the summer and fall of 2008. In particular, I attended three Wilder pageant plays: *Fragments of a Dream* (Walnut Grove, Minnesota); *These Happy Golden Years* (De Smet, South Dakota); and *Laura’s Memories* (Mansfield, Missouri).
In spite of their enduring popularity, Wilder’s life and works are only beginning to receive scholarly attention. While the bulk of the (small pool of) criticism focuses on the content of the books, I wish to expand my analysis to alternative ways of experiencing Laura Ingalls Wilder. In focusing on the pageant plays, I challenge the binary that privileges written texts over performance and product over the process of the live event. Furthermore, as a distinctly feminine personal narrative, there is an erasure of patriarchal hierarchy as the focus of the pageant is on the growth and agency of a young girl. As Wilder goes against normative culture in her desire to play outdoors, to help her father in his work, and her refusal to be “seen and not heard,” she works to produce what Christine Delphy describes as sex roles “simply mark[ing] a social division” (63). As such, I focus on the construction of female identity and gender representation in the format of the pageant, representation in performance, and what I observed as audience reaction/interaction. Thus, I outline areas in which other audiences may take Wilder’s persona and incorporate it into her own experiences and creating a new performance of identity.

In her book, *Feminism and Theatre*, Sue Ellen Case inextricably links theatrical texts and performances with the social construction of culture and identity, noting that “[androcentric] culture invented its own representation of the gender, and it was this fictional ‘Woman’ who appeared […] while suppressing the experiences, stories, feelings, and fantasies of actual women” (7). In order to reclaim a more female-centered view of the past as well as present, she articulates a model of theatrical practice that may enable women to be both the primary subjects and producers of culture. Case’s new “poetics” of theatre works on multiple levels to construct the feminine voice: “with the deconstruction of the forms of representation, and dialogue and modes of perception characteristic of patriarchal culture, the stage can be prepared for the
entrance of the female subject” (146). Thus, for Case, the theatrical text, the performance, and its reception by the audience are all valuable tools in building a feminist theatre piece. Here, I argue that both the form and function of Wilder’s pageant plays fit the mold of Case’s feminist theatre, beginning with its situating of form – the theatrical pageant.

Scholars generally agree that the pageant play has its origins in the Middle Ages, surrounding the newly created Christian feast of Corpus Christi, an event which celebrated the mysterious relationship between Jesus Christ’s divinity and his humanity. While Corpus Christi originally focuses on all the events in Jesus’s life from birth to death and resurrection, it grew to include “a cosmic drama which encompassed events ranging from the creation to the destruction of the world” (83). Furthermore, as theatre historian Oscar Brockett notes, Corpus Christi was also “motivated in part by the desire to make the church more relevant to the ordinary people and their lives” (83). Thus, as the celebrations were taken out of doors in order to make them more accessible, people from all ranks and classes were permitted to participate in both parades and dramatic presentation, and vernacular language entered into an increasing range of plays meditating on cosmic themes and often included homage to local patron saints and town life.

With the advent of trade guilds and craftsmen, “pageant wagons” were sponsored and built that were paraded through the town, stopped at its center (often the church) and literally “unpacked” into a small stage, complete with elaborate scenery, special effects, props and costumes. As the festivals often lasted for days, as many as fifty short plays could be performed, with each scene / episode being played out by a different wagon, and often with the townspeople participating as both spectators and performers. It is this sense of group involvement across divisions of class that is at the heart of the pageant play. As scholar V.A. Kolve notes, everyone “was invited above all to contemplate the human tragedy of the Passion, and through that contemplation to
share in its transcendental victory” (4-5, emphasis added). Thus, it is through the act of “feeling with” that a community is formed and group identity strengthened.

In many ways, the pageant plays of Laura Ingalls Wilder borrow from the traditional format popular in the Middle Ages. None of the plays were written by Wilder, but all are adaptations of the story of her childhood as played out in the “Little House” series (and, of course, demonstrated previously in “Pioneer Girl”). While none of the three plays that I saw featured literal wagons, each of the “scenes” were played out at individual stations – the actors moving from one sedentary scenic location to another - instead of pausing for a “scene change” as in traditional theatrical performance:

Fig 16: “Stations” for various scenes in These Happy Golden Years (De Smet, South Dakota). Photo by Nicole Mancino.

Similarly, all these plays took place outdoors, and all were situated on the outskirts of town or very close by. Similarly, the subject matter of each of the three pageants was predicated upon the actual events that took place in town. For example, as On the Banks of Plum Creek details

40 My goal in analyzing Wilder’s pageant plays in conjunction with medieval theatrical pageantry is to note similarities at base level, and to describe how Wilder’s plays echo the same function in regards to community. Due to the scope and length of this section, I deliberately limit my study of medieval theatre to all but a cursory glance. I acknowledge the fact that I make no real distinctions between miracle, mystery, or morality plays. Similarly, while the format of the Wilder pageant plays necessitates a comparison to medieval pageantry, I also grant similar characteristics are present in other types of dramatic performance, such as in carnivale and medieval minstrelsy.
the Ingalls family’s adventures while in Walnut Grove, Minnesota, so then the pageant in Walnut Grove features the events in that book. Similarly, De Smet, South Dakota, is the setting for the last four books of the series, and so every few years the pageant alternates which book it seeks to highlight. While Mansfield, Missouri is not the setting for any of the eight books, it is where Wilder made her adult home and wrote the series; thus, this pageant features Wilder as a writer and includes snippets from all of her published works.

Finally, as with traditional pageants, the Wilder plays are all done with some attempt to draw together community. All of the pageants I attended were held in conjunction with a town-wide weekend festival commemorating Wilder and her life in the town; a weekend, which, I was told by festival planners in each town, brings in much needed revenue to keep businesses going. As the pageant program for De Smet’s These Happy Golden Years contains not only the traditional information about the show and actors (many of whom are local residents), but also a short history of the town and a map to its most popular sites, as well as a feature entitled “Volunteers are the Heart of the Pageant,” it is logical to conclude that the Wilder pageant plays are a means of developing community identity. Thus, the identity of the community is intertwined with that of Wilder, and as all of the plays I witnessed contained small references to contemporary times and place, Wilder’s identity is also expanded to include the experiences of the contemporary community.

And yet, while traditional pageant plays work to unify the community in a similar manner, they do so through universalizing the humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ. Here, the Wilder pageant plays radically alter the paradigm in that they seek not to embody the male son of God, but rather, a woman who writes her life, her desires and her own destiny, and intertwines herself with the spirit of the pioneering movement. The idea of “Woman” (Wilder) as a
universalizing subject is relatively new, particularly in considering the history of traditional pageantry. In 1949, less than ten years after the release of These Happy Golden Years, Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex was published. In it, she discusses the category of “woman” as a social construction both in conjunction with and inferior to that of “man.” She states, “humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being. […] He is the Subject, he is the absolute-she is the Other” (33). In order for women to gain “full membership in the human race,” de Beauvoir advocates, similarly to Case, that women must invert the binary and become the primary subjects of their own lives. While Wilder positions herself and the process of her growth and maturation at the forefront of her books, often ignoring the preferred social graces of the day, the pageant plays follow through in allowing Wilder agency in her subjectivity.

Interestingly, while most of the textual material in the three pageants is taken directly from the books, all three employ the use of “Wilder” as a physical omniscient narrator (in the same manner as the Stage Manager in Thornton Wilder’s Our Town), who is able to introduce scenes and characters, and who speaks directly to the audience.
In all three plays, Wilder-the-Narrator is the senior citizen who begins writing the “Little House” series in her sixties, who delights in receiving fan mail from schoolchildren, and who makes her last public appearance at age eighty-seven years at a public library during a children’s book signing. As such, time and space collide as Wilder-the-Narrator is able to interact with Wilder-the-Character (Laura) from her girlhood. In *Fragments of a Dream*, the opening of the play has the entire town running in front of and around the various scenic stages meant to represent the town of Walnut Grove. Around twenty five people of all ages and in traditional “prairie” garb greet each other on the street, ride real horses, and make purchases from the general store. Suddenly, the entire cast freezes, and, from the middle of the stage with a featured spotlight, we see an elderly woman who identifies herself as Laura Ingalls Wilder, who then describes the scenery and the townspeople around her.
In the opening moments of *These Happy Golden Years*, the audience sees a silent dumb show underneath the sounds of a fiddle played out in the scene at the center of the stage: children in long dresses playing in front of a log cabin, while a woman sets a table and finishes dinner over a crude cook stove. Outside, a man puts his horses in the stable and cleans up, ready for dinner. As lights fade over the beginning of the meal, they come up over the station stage right, where Wilder-the-Narrator introduces herself and begins reading aloud from a copy of *These Happy Golden Years*. While she remains at her “post” throughout the play, periodically narrating the action, young Laura also has the occasional ability to pause, break the fourth wall, and address the audience. For example, when faced with the prospect of her first time as a teacher – who must also board away from home with strangers – Laura uses an aside to describe both her fear and refusal to give up, as her salary will afford her sister, Mary, the opportunity to attend Iowa’s College for the Blind.

Finally, the audience of *Laura’s Memories* are treated to an opening moment of darkening lights as Wilder-the-Narrator’s voice is suddenly heard describing her birth and early childhood in Pepin, Wisconsin. As the lights go up, we see her two aunts readying themselves for a “sugaring off” dance during the winter sap run, as depicted in *Little House in the Big Woods*. The next scene is a musical number about what it means to be the bearer of the title of her second work: *Farmer Boy*. It is not until the third scene that we see Wilder-the-Narrator and Laura-the-Character; here, we find Wilder-the-Narrator at the local library, in a celebration that re-names the building in her honor. In celebration, Wilder will “re-visit” portions from all eight books of her series, and we are invited to “share” and, subsequently, participate, in these memories with her.
As all three pageant plays contain more than one physical embodiment of Laura Ingalls Wilder, as well as a shifting in time and space as we identity with Wilder’s different ages, there is a departure from traditional theatrical format. Feminist theatre scholar Helene Keyssar describes the tropes of non-traditional (feminist) theatre as the transformation of the self, as opposed to revelation of the self:

Traditional heroism lies in this process of recognition and unveiling. Even in psychoanalytically oriented feminist plays, however, the self is not seen as stable and hidden but as shifting, alterable, admirably and problematically varied. Nor is the world in which characters exist reassuringly unified and solid, but fragmented and diverse. (XIV)

Throughout the three pageant plays, Wilder’s self is presented as fragmented, as the omniscient “senior” Wilder is ever present against the growing and maturing “Laura’s” of childhood. In Laura’s Memories, for example, Laura is shown as young as four years and grows to age eighteen years before the play ends. Similarly, the other two plays showcase Laura from ages seven to twelve years. As all three plays feature moments where the “senior” Wilder is onstage concurrently with “childhood” Laura, the notion of Wilder’s identity in a state of transformation becomes a literal theatrical device.

Similarly, time and space collapse as Wilder-the-Narrator from Fragments of a Dream is able to transcend the boundaries of 1950s Missouri. While other characters are not able to roam freely through the sets of the various scenes, Wilder-the-Narrator is able to walk throughout her childhood town of Walnut Grove, as well as interact with other characters. As the scenes jump from childhood experience to reminiscing narrator, a linear, progressive mode of storytelling is disrupted in favor of a cyclical, equalizing meditation on themes of maturity and inner growth.
Perhaps most interestingly, as “Laura” navigates throughout the ten scenes that comprise *Laura’s Memories*, she is played by four different actors, as are her sisters, close friends, and future husband, Almanzo. While there is no direct addressing of these casting changes, they are obvious in physicality: body types, hair colors, height, and costume. While this artistic choice may simply be the result of a desire to include as many opportunities for actors as possible, one feminist reading could hold that to “become” Laura is a continual process, that the subject is always in progress, and that a multitude of interpretations of the self are possible. In deliberately portraying “Laura/Wilder” through different ages, body types, etc., there is a calling of attention to the construction of gender in the way that Judith Butler describes a series of daily performances as something “put on” in order that we may “expand the cultural field bodily through subversive performances of various kinds” (1105). As *Laura’s Memories* literally begins with a disembodied voice, there is further evidence that the concept of what it means to have / be defined by the body is meant to be troubled and questioned. Thus, the possibilities for representing who Laura Ingalls Wilder is and who she can become are endless.

It has long been noted that traditional theatrical performances are affected by its audiences in sizes, catcalls, and energy. Susan Bennett articulates this phenomenon by noting that, “Cultural assumptions affect performances, and performances rewrite cultural assumptions” (2). Thus, every individual is an audience, and every individual will interact with a performance from a different subjective state every time she comes in contact with it. In my observations and conversations with some of the audience members of the three pageant plays, I found that the overwhelming majority of people I spoke to were either devoted fans of the “Little House” series, or were the parents of such devotees. It appeared that they waited for and then joyfully acknowledged such anticipated moments as the fight with childhood nemesis Nellie Oleson, the
tragedy of Mary’s blindness, and the romance of Laura’s marriage proposal. In fact, it seemed to me that (as any performer will tell you) these moments were “milked” to both inspire the greatest emotional reaction from the audience and also timed for the audible reaction to die down.

Furthermore, there were a significant number of people in each audience (mostly young girls and boys, but a few adult women and men as well) that were dressed in such “prairie” garb as long dresses, pants with suspenders, and straw hats and bonnets, many of which could be purchased next to the concession stands.

Fig 18: During a performance of *Fragments of a Dream* (Walnut Grove, Minnesota), young audience members dress in “prairie garb” of bonnets and like-dresses. Photo by Nicole Mancino.

In the program for *Laura’s Memories*, there is a reprinting of a famous quote Wilder gave in an interview:

The “Little House” books are stories of long ago … the way we lived and your schools are much different now. So many changes have made living and learning easier. But the real things haven’t changed. It is still best to be honest and
truthful: to make the most of what we have; to be happy with simple pleasures and to be cheerful and have courage when things go wrong.

This view of life is not a static experience; instead, during the performance of the play, Wilder calls for revisions, for courage, and encourages a questioning of the status quo in order to change things that are “wrong.” In giving this to the audience and encouraging their participation through clothing and direct address, they are also invited to participate in the embodiment of “Laura” and her pioneering spirit… and they do: The “prairie children” dance in aisles alongside characters when Pa plays his fiddle and the onstage townspeople attended a musical church revival. There are the adults who audibly approve as Laura from These Happy Golden Years privately tells the audience that she does not believe in using the word “obey” during her marriage ceremony because “I could not obey anyone against my better judgment.” And as Wilder-the-Narrator invites the audience into the library as she revisits the writing of her eight books, they are happy to oblige through auditory exclamation.

Thus, as Wilder began to write about her childhood in the novels that were to become the popular “Little House” series, she articulates that she has power in creating a record of her developing identity, and also notes that her personal lived experience is directly connected to the overall construction of culture. As the narrator and primary figurehead of the various pageant plays that embody her lived experience, Wilder invites her audience on a journey to re-live, re-learn, and re-experience what it means to be a pioneer, and what it means to be a female subject. While I only observed small female children in the pageantry audiences adorned with the signature prairie-style bonnets from Wilder’s pioneering childhood, Wilder speaks openly to all to participate in this shaping of identity. In Feminism and Theatre, Sue Ellen Case describes her work as a response to a call from feminists who “wanted to see some guidelines, a sampling of
ways to evaluate theatre work from within feminist politics” (2). I believe that the Wilder pageant plays may serve as a template in their treatment of feminine identity. With their focus showcasing of multiple, valued versions of “Laura” – including an invitation to share that identity with the audience – these pageant plays embody the essence of feminist theatre in its continued breakdown of hierarchy and transformation of the self. Then, too, while each pageant play adopts itself to the needs of the community, the core of each piece is the representation of a woman’s life and subjecthood taken directly from her voice and point of view. And as each audience member reconfigures what it means to be a child that has the power to shape America as Wilder did, so too the notion of what the female voice and subject can become is continually valued, strengthened, and expanded.

**Summaries and Conclusions:**

As the Laura Ingalls Wilder pageant plays advocate a strong and independent female subject, the historical Wilder was also interested in the growth of the feminine voice. In an April, 1919 article, “Women’s Work?,” she discusses the development and direction of the American Woman:

But however curious we may be about the past, we are more vitally interested in the future. Will these women take up their old work and give the men a chance to go back to the places they will thus leave vacant? The women say not. Other women, also, besides those who took men’s jobs, have gone out of the places they filled in pre-war days, out into the community and social work and government positions which were created by and because of the war. Will these women go back? And again we hear them answer, “Never! We will never go back!” All this is very well, but where are they going and with them all of us? I think this
query could most truthfully be answered by a slang expression, which, though perhaps not polished, is very apt; “We don’t know where we’re going, but we’re on our way.” (202)

Here, Wilder clearly outlines a burgeoning awareness of feminine oppression, as well as a refusal to remain in a position of social and cultural inferiority. Yet, while she is adamant that women explore whatever newfound freedoms they can, she significantly does not focus on a particular avenue or direction these explorations should take. By focusing on the knowledge that women are “on our way,” she highlights those same values of open identity and movement that she values in her own development, as in the opening lines of “Pioneer Girl.”

When I began working on this dissertation, I thought I knew the direction I wanted to take my research. I was interested in seeking alternative identities of Laura Ingalls Wilder, and creating new opportunities for meaning making in her body of / as work. Working within the framework of performance and feminist theories, I borrowed from Cixous’s paradigm of l’écriture féminine as my overarching methodology. In privileging works and contexts that are traditionally relegated to a marginal position, I sought out new forms of embodiment of the poetic, exploratory discourse that characterizes the performance of the feminine voice. As Wilder is known primarily for the eight original (plus one posthumous) works that comprise the published “Little House” series, I used works that are traditionally treated as supplemental in Wilder scholarship, and thereby inverted the power paradigm. I focused my research around Wilder’s unpublished, handwritten full-length work, “Pioneer Girl,” and supplemented with her personal letters, Wilder’s newspaper column, family history, and the context of historical movements.
Because Wilder is known for her life’s story, particularly that of her childhood, it seemed appropriate that I engage her on her chosen grounds, and explore her identity through some semblance of chronological age; thus, my second chapter focuses more on her ancestors and early life, the third centers more on her teenage years up to age eighteen, and the fourth offers primary observations about / from Wilder from her forties through her eighties. Yet, in keeping with feminist precautions against the enforcement of traditional hierarchies, I have consciously attempted to approach each chapter thematically as well; first an exploration of historical context surrounding the identity of the author, followed by the identity of the subject “Laura” within “Pioneer Girl,” and, finally, the identity of the text as shown through the process of its writing and its relationship to the audience. Lastly, I was interested in the performative paradigm of public / private; particularly in its relation to the feminist trope that the personal is political, I was curious as to where the act of writing and its relationship to author and audience might place itself within that continuum.

And it is here, I believe, that I almost committed a grave error. In his germinal essay “Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance,” Dwight Conquergood outlines four ethical “pitfalls” a performer/ethnographer may fall victim to in her quest to know an Other. In committing the sin of the “Enthusiast’s Infatuation,” Conquergood describes how “Eager performers” get sucked into the quicksand of belief, ‘Aren’t all people really just alike?’ […] this performative stance is unethical because it trivializes the other. The distinctiveness of the other is glossed over by a glaze of generalities” (6). During the process of my research, I began to develop a viewpoint akin to Conquergood’s “Enthusiast’s Infatuation;”

41 While my work on this dissertation certainly does not qualify me as a performer or an ethnographer in the traditional sense (as described near the end of Chapter Four), I do believe that my goals in knowing Laura Ingalls Wilder and the culture surrounding her are similar to what Conquergood describes. Furthermore, I concur that there is a kind of performance taking place anytime one observes and writes about an Other.
while I—particularly in my identification as a feminist—do not believe that all people are “really just alike,” I, nonetheless, began to automatically think that Wilder would, at times, think “just like” me.

When I began my research on Laura Ingalls Wilder, I imagined that my findings would articulate a smooth arc on the continuum of private to public. I originally viewed “Pioneer Girl” as an expression of a personal, private voice. Whereas I have discussed a more candid tone in “Pioneer Girl” as opposed to the published series—and she, herself, has discussed an editing of content for those books—I initially took this to mean that Wilder wrote without the burdens of pleasing a commercial public and/or a patriarchal audience. I wanted to then show that this private representation of Wilder’s self had the ability to transcend the context of its making as readers and public audiences interacted with the work, and went so far as to embody the persona of “Laura” in the public and performative setting of the pageant play. Despite the fact that my dissertation advocates movement, growth, and transformation, my first instinct was that my research would fit into a neat box; or, rather, that it would fit into a neat line. I wanted it to “make sense.” Because I thought that way, it did not occur to me that Wilder may not share those same predispositions.

And yet, she didn’t, and I had moments of indecision while I reworked my idea of a proper framework to reflect the results I actually found. As Conquergood points out, the goal of a Dialogical performance is an encounter with the speaker and the Other:

Dialogical performance is a way of having intimate conversation with other people and cultures. Instead of speaking about them, one speaks to and with them. […] Dialogical Performance is a way of finding the moral center as much as it is an indicator that one is ethically grounded. One does not have to delay
entering the conversation until self and other have become old friends. Indeed, as the metaphor makes clear, one cannot build a friendship without beginning a conversation. Dialogical performance is the means as much as the end of honest intercultural understanding. (10)

When a conversation takes place, it is not always comfortable or easy. While I never believed the paradigm of public / private to exist as the broken imbalance of a binary, I did think its form and space would appear as the forever-stretching line of a continuum, where one constantly travels in between two points. What I found – what I believe that my study of Laura Ingalls Wilder and the culture of her world is trying to communicate – is that the two actually exist as a spiral, continually traveling towards and away from each other at the same time. For, while the act of writing is indeed private, the observations come from a deeply personal place, and the physical act places the author alone with the work, its inception is created by a myriad of contexts that exist in the public world: the history of a country, social movements, life in one’s community and the relationships one has with its inhabitants. As Wilder very clearly states that all of her writing is motivated by her desire to teach and connect with children – not to mention the editing choices that reveals Wilder’s interest in an audience beyond herself – it is clearly she wrote “Pioneer Girl” with the notion of a kind of public in mind. Similarly, on a physical level, when the work leaves the hands of the author, it immediately becomes available for public consumption, as it exists as an artifact in its own right.

At the same time, while the live aspect of the pageant play is certainly a public event, it is also private; when any reader engages with a piece of writing, that process of identification is done through private thoughts and emotions, recreating its performance anew. When I began my research, transcribed Wilder’s manuscripts and letters, visited her homesites, and cooked her
recipes, her public culture became private again…to me. Thus, my “conversation” with Laura Ingalls Wilder has altered my conception of the relationship between the private and the public. While I believed that the definitions of such concepts were always social constructions, I did not consider the shape their relationship would take. Instead of moving back and forth between two points, I recognize performances of identity as possibly containing aspects of both within the same space, curving back towards one another.

Also embedded in this process are the feminist values on change and the transformation of the self. As they celebrate the idea of a fluid identity, they also reflect and recreate the complexity of individual and communal identity, both of which refuse to be essentialized. Elizabeth Grosz expands this idea, arguing,

> It is only if women are ambiguously *both* subjects *and* deprived of a socially recognized subjective position, are *both* speaking beings *and* beings whose words have not been heard; and beings who have a sexuality, but whose sexual specificities are ignored, denied, or covered over that women can undertake feminist politics (Grosz 65).

In acknowledging the agency of writing, I am presenting powerful examples of women who believe they contain enough worth to be the subjects of their own lives. Yet, at the same time, the performances they produce must publicly exist in a world which does not always valorize their survival. Ultimately, it is the liminal tension between the two states that articulates the irreconcilable realm of the feminine.

Richard Schechner has coined performance as “restored behavior”: the latter of these words equates the state of being with an exploration of the physical, while the former refers to a
kind of cyclical forward momentum (35). For Schechner, performance is a physical and emotional construction that must be seen and personally experienced, and the detached act of reading about performance is an insufficient means of calling up the event. In ways similar to the inadequacy of traditional recorded performance, the lives of women have been subordinate to those of men in the recorded annals of time. As Joan Kelly-Gadol notes, “Throughout historical time, women have been largely excluded from making war, wealth, law, government, arts, and science […] Women figured chiefly as exceptions, those who did were said to be ruthless as, or wrote like, or had the brains of men” (7). It is not merely that women’s voices and performances are largely absent from traditional historical terrain, but that their very visibility is determined through the eyes of patriarchy.

As such, it is quite a challenge for anyone who wishes to engage in the process of seeing and reading women of the past. Yet, as this dissertation closes, I am convinced that Laura Ingalls Wilder provides many opportunities to connect with past feminine performances of identity, and in creating them anew. Without literally being able to “speak” with Wilder or privilege her best-known work, I believe I have added to the greater performance of her identity. While some scholars before me have discussed her connection to pioneerism and her exploration of gender roles, I believe I am the only one to use performance theory and to forefront materialist feminist theory. Similarly, there are no full-length studies that focus on “Pioneer Girl,” or the concept of Wilder pageant plays. It is my belief that studying Wilder’s non-standard materials performs the same work that undoes the binary of andocentric man overpowering the subordinate, historical woman; in focusing on that which is not traditionally studied or given privileged attention, I attest and help to produce its worth, contributing to the greater truth of what it means to be.
Finally, it is this last statement that has provided me with my other great learning experience in the process of writing this document. In addition to the fact that the results of my study spoke to me outside my expectations, I was also surprised in the myriad of locations and spaces in which these results were found. It never occurred to me that a simple newspaper advertisement could help speak as a role model for self-confidence and independence, that it is possible for someone writing in the 1920s about her life in the 1870s to articulate a perfect example of what is considered contemporary materialist feminist thought, and how much an audience wants to perform the identities it comes into contact with on stage.

Ultimately, I am struck by the power any audience has in creating the world around them. As an audience to her self, Wilder wrote her childhood to suit the needs of historical fact and the truth of her feelings, while those in the homesites I visited were able to take her story and recreate it to suit the identity of their community. As for myself, the act of massive transcription, poring through old manuscripts, letters, and newspaper articles, has confirmed and strengthened my belief that there is no one way of looking at the world. My own dissertation / performance of Laura Ingalls Wilder, in truth, confirms and reflects my own identity as much as it does hers; as I am the one who has looked for her, searched her out, and claimed her, she is colored by my perceptions and my beliefs in constructions of gender and performances of identity.

In seeking out different permutations of Wilder’s identity, I have discovered additions to my own, as well. Wilder is not an overtly radical woman for her time; she did not campaign for women’s suffrage, she did not go against the normative notion of a wife and mother. Her writing suggests the exemplar of Cixous’s woman who has been “driven” from her own body. And so that is the space where Wilder’s feminism and identity occupy: in little choices and small moments. As such, I have begun to view my own seemingly mundane choices as containing
value; just as Wilder made statements with her choice of clothing, her love of learning, and her pride in her abilities to cook and maintain a house, I realize I, too, can claim agency of self in small, everyday performances. The possibilities are limited only by the willingness to look:

Fig 19: A view of Plum Creek, Minnesota. Photo by Nicole Mancino.
Works Cited


APPENDIX B
Proof of Approval from the Human Subjects Review Board &
Sample Informed Consent Sheet for Interview Subjects

BOWLING GREEN STATE UNIVERSITY
Department of Theatre and Film

The Life and Work of Laura Ingalls Wilder
Dissertation Research - Interview
Informed Consent Form

You are invited to be in a research study on the life and writings of Laura Ingalls Wilder. As part of my work as a graduate student in the Department of Theatre and Film at Bowling Green State University, I am conducting a research study of the festivals and museums celebrating Laura Ingalls Wilder. This study is being conducted as part of my doctoral dissertation. The purpose of my study is to examine which aspects of Wilder’s work, museums, and festivals are most important and interesting to those who read and attend them and why.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and will involve participation in an interview that will last about half an hour to one hour. If you decide to participate and change your mind later, you may withdraw your consent and stop your participation at any time without penalty or explanation. You may decide not to answer any question you wish.

The interview will focus on your experiences as a performer/organizer/worker of the Laura Ingalls Wilder festival/museum site/pageant. I will ask questions about what your role is, how you became involved in the work, and what experiences you have had with the public at your job. Additionally, if you agree to include such information, I may contact you after the interview to ask you to a few more questions on your responses. The anticipated risks to you are no greater than those normally encountered in daily life.

Your participation in this study will help me further document the life and work of Laura Ingalls Wilder, and how she has positively affected readers over time. You may not benefit directly from your participation. However, your participation will help myself and others better understand the relationship between Wilder and modern culture. This documented research will be added to the growing area of known Wilder lore and information and may help those who are trying to secure funding for the various Wilder sites in the future.

Because I would like to compare results from different festivals/museum sites/pageants, it will be necessary to group my responses by location. That is, I would like to use your name and job title in my dissertation. If, however, if you are not comfortable being identified in my research project, the confidentiality of your identity will be carefully protected and any mention of your name or any other identifying features will be removed or coded in the written transcripts of the interview and any presentation materials. The interview transcripts will then be secured so that only myself and my advisor will see them.

While I prefer to do this interview in person and audiotape the interview, you may prefer it be done over the internet through email. While I am happy to do so, please note that e-mail is not 100% secure, so it is possible that someone intercepting your e-mail will have access to your responses.
Please indicate your preference regarding the use of your name and in my study:

______ The researchers may use my real name in the project and my real job title.

______ The researchers may not use my real name but may use my real job title.

______ Please do not use my real name or my real job title and keep my identity confidential.

At any time during the interview, you can choose not to answer any question asked. You may withdraw consent and stop participation at any time during the project without consequence. Your decision to participate or not to participate will not result in penalty in any way.

Additional questions or concerns about this study may be directed to Nicole Mancino (215-514-5876, nmancin@bgsu) or to my Advisor Jonathan Chambers (419-372-9618, jonathc@bgnet.bgsu.edu). If you have questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a research participant, you may contact, the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Board, Bowling Green State University (419-372-7716, hsrb@bgnet.bgsu.edu).

Your signature below indicates that you have been informed about what is expected of you as a participant in this study, that you are over 18 years of age, and that your participation is entirely voluntary.

__________________________  ____________________________
Signature                  Printed Name

__________________________  ____________________________
Phone Number or Email     Date