

## CHAPTER 17

### **“IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE”**

*Little Miss Higgins Sings the Blues  
in Nokomis, Saskatchewan<sup>1</sup>*

Charity Marsh

When we moved to Nokomis, we felt stuck in the middle of nowhere, but it's everywhere to us now.<sup>2</sup>

#### **Introduction: “Over the hills. Across the plains.”**

**M**uch of what happens musically in Saskatchewan (and arguably across the prairie provinces) is deeply influenced by the unique experiences that transpire when one lives in an expansive geographical setting that is sparsely populated and is mediated through a discourse of rural sensibilities, a nostalgic longing for a romanticized past, and a contentious history of colonial/settler relations, as has been argued throughout *Overlooking Sas-*

<sup>1</sup> At the time this chapter was written, Little Miss Higgins lived exclusively in Nokomis with Dave “Foy” Taylor. Currently (2014), Little Miss Higgins is performing with the musical group the Winnipeg Five, otherwise known as the F-Holes. This means that much of her time living and creating is now spent in a different region of the prairies—Winnipeg. The content of this chapter, however, focuses on the music and life that she created while living in Nokomis.

<sup>2</sup> Little Miss Higgins, speaking at Spanning the Distance: Popular Music in Canada, International Association of Popular Music Canada Conference, in a workshop featuring her and Taylor held at the University of Regina, May 6, 2006.

*katchewan: Minding the Gap* in various ways. For some musicians, isolation from large urban centres and a bustling scene is detrimental. But for artists like Little Miss Higgins (a.k.a. Jolene Higgins), a singer-songwriter and guitarist with a national reputation who has chosen rural Saskatchewan as her base, isolation, expansive geographical space, and small-town living act as catalysts for her creativity, contextualize her music production and performance, and ultimately influence how her music is consumed by audiences both inside and outside Saskatchewan.

Rooted in the genres and styles most closely associated with the blues and vaudeville, Little Miss Higgins's music and performance style both provoke and challenge stereotypical representations of Saskatchewan. From rural and agricultural markers, to "fly-over province" and "mind the gap" metaphors, to misrepresentations of our lack (of culture, of a robust economic position, of any national political clout, of a large enough population to matter), to romantic notions of abundance (idyllic landscapes, wide-open spaces, bountiful lakes, living skies, and prosperous land for farming, hunting, fishing, and mining), Little Miss Higgins embraces the contrary and takes up the forward-lookingness of the province and its citizens in her songs. For her, the town of Nokomis, in south-central Saskatchewan, and the surrounding landscape have become central characters in her music. And she has become central to the characterization of Nokomis and its landscape.



Little Miss Higgins and Foy Taylor—*Cobbler Shop Sessions*. Courtesy of Jolene Higgins. Photo by Glenn Thompson.

To consider how the Saskatchewan landscape shapes the production, performance, and consumption of Little Miss Higgins's music, in this chapter I turn to the work of social anthropologist Julie Cruikshank in *Do Glaciers Listen? Local Knowledge, Colonial Encounters, and Social Imagination*, in which she argues that "the enduring power of landscape features to act as points of reference for communicating tacit knowledge" leads to the "transforming [of] seemingly neutral spaces into places of significance."<sup>3</sup> To acknowledge Nokomis, and more generally the province of Saskatchewan, as "places of significance" embodies the purpose of Higgins's entire collection of works. Moreover, to reflect on the cultural practices of Little Miss Higgins (with Foy Taylor, her musical collaborator) and how she is affected by her surroundings brings to the surface a myriad of critical questions. What is significant about this unusual pair—two white artists who are not originally from Saskatchewan who create and perform in the genres of country blues and vaudeville (genres historically represented as a black cultural form) while living in Nokomis, a white German settler town located on land identified by the Indian Act as Treaty Six territory and ultimately embedded within a history of settler colonialism? How has Little Miss Higgins and her music impacted, reshaped, and influenced how one reads the small town of Nokomis? How has Nokomis in turn affected Little Miss Higgins and her music, performance, and production styles? How do her music and performance styles challenge conventional concepts of place? How does her music represent or speak to this cultural, social, political location? What is at stake now that her cover of Memphis Minnie's "I'm Gonna Bake My Biscuits" has become part of the current Saskatchewan vernacular, carrying an anthem-like quality? How have Little Miss Higgins and her musical interpretations of Nokomis and Saskatchewan created new *local knowledge*, in other words "tacit knowledge embodied in life experiences and reproduced in everyday behaviour and speech"?<sup>4</sup>

Through an analysis of songs from her albums, *Cobbler Shop Sessions* (2005), *Junction City* (2007), *Little Miss Higgins Live* (2009), and *Across the Plains* (2010) and the music video for "In the Middle of Nowhere,"<sup>5</sup> along with interviews that I conducted with both Lit-

<sup>3</sup> Julie Cruikshank, *Do Glaciers Listen? Local Knowledge, Colonial Encounters, and Social Imagination* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005), 11.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>5</sup> My rationale for including all four albums in this discussion is to illustrate that what I understand to be happening is not a "one-time" theme in a band's first album; rather, there is a trajectory, an ongoing, dynamic connection, between music and place that continues in subsequent performance and production.

tle Miss Higgins and Foy Taylor over the past several years I want to understand in this chapter how living in Nokomis has shaped Little Miss Higgins's music; to explore how her music in turn has affected the community of Nokomis; and ultimately to theorize how Little Miss Higgins calls into question conventional understandings of place and space in relation to Saskatchewan. Applying Doreen Massey's concept of "a global sense of place" from her article of that title, and her argument that place is not fixed or bound but should be understood or conceived as a "meeting place," as an "ongoing production rather than pre-given,"<sup>6</sup> I consider Nokomis and its importance as a place of musical significance. Building on Cruikshank's argument that landscape "ha[s] provided imaginative grist for comprehending and interpreting shifting social circumstances," I propose that the prairie landscape around Nokomis, as seen and heard through the musical discourse of Little Miss Higgins, has been transformed from a "seemingly neutral space" into a "place of significance"<sup>7</sup> and that she and her musical interpretations of this landscape (geographical, social, political, cultural) in turn represent new and complex meanings of Saskatchewan and its shifting place in current national narratives.

#### **Space, Place, and Isolation: Saskatchewan and "the Middle of Nowhere"**

Miles and miles of emptiness  
You might hear an echo from the distance  
Don't you go down that road  
You might get seized by the snow  
Out in the Middle of Nowhere<sup>8</sup>

To some, Saskatchewan is "the middle of nowhere"—a "fly-over" or "drive-through" province that seemingly calls for little attention. For those of us who live, work, play, and create in Saskatchewan, however, "the middle of nowhere", as Little Miss Higgins suggests, is "everywhere to us now." The rationale for and the problematizing of Saskatchewan's troubled reputation have already been theorized by the editors of this collection—Randal Rogers in his introduction and

<sup>6</sup> Doreen Massey, "A Global Sense of Place," in *Space, Place, and Gender* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1991), 146–156, and Doreen Massey, "Landscape as a Provocation: Reflections on Moving Mountains," *Journal of Material Culture* 11, 1–2 (2006): 34.

<sup>7</sup> Cruikshank, *Do Glaciers Listen?*, 12.

<sup>8</sup> Little Miss Higgins, "In the Middle of Nowhere," *Junction City*, 2007.

Christine Ramsay in her chapter on the province's capital—as well as in several of the other contributions.<sup>9</sup> For the purposes of this chapter, however, it is essential to emphasize that the topography of Saskatchewan is diverse. Contrary to its representation of flatness and flowing fields upon fields of wheat, Saskatchewan is also home to deserts, rolling hills, dense bush, numerous lakes, and rocky terrain. Saskatchewan takes its place in the middle of the prairie provinces, sharing borders with Manitoba and Alberta, and to the north lies the Northwest Territories. Currently, the population is approximately 1,000,040 people, with about 220,000 people living in Regina (the capital city of the province, located in south Saskatchewan) and about 250,000 people living in Saskatoon (the business centre of the province, located in central Saskatchewan). The fact that these two cities comprise almost half the population of the province is significant when trying to understand its geographical, political, and cultural landscapes. Throughout the province are a number of smaller cities, towns, and reserves, but they seem few and far between because of long stretches of highways and numerous grid roads. Because one can travel for hours only to come across a sign-post, a cluster of vacant buildings or the remains of an old house or barn<sup>10</sup> (as David Garneau's chapter in *Overlooking Saskatchewan* so well elaborates),<sup>11</sup> the prairie landscape seems vast, and one is easily overcome by a feeling of isolation. Being "stuck in the middle of nowhere" can be simultaneously frightening and liberating.

In my previous work on hip hop culture in Saskatchewan, I have detailed how, for much of the province, "the remaining evidence of once thriving settler communities amounts to abandoned, decrepit, and boarded up buildings, which followed the amalgamation of schools, post-offices, and other services, along with mass purchases of farm land by large agri-business, and the decline in the use of the railroad."<sup>12</sup> Over the past decade, "the uncertainty of crops, the rise in farming costs, and

<sup>9</sup> See also my discussion of the racialization of Saskatchewan as it pertains more specifically to Regina's North Central community in Charity Marsh, "Keepin' It Real? Masculinity, Indigeneity, and Media Representations of Gangsta Rap in Regina," in *Making It like a Man: Canadian Masculinities in Practice*, ed. Christine Ramsay (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2011), 149–70.

<sup>10</sup> Charity Marsh, "Bits and Pieces of Truth: Storytelling, Identity, and Hip Hop in Saskatchewan," in *Perspectives on Contemporary Aboriginal Music in Canada*, ed. A. Hoefnagels and B. Diamond (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012), 350.

<sup>11</sup> Also see David Garneau, "Making Art like a Man!," in *Making It like a Man: Canadian Masculinities in Practice*, ed. Christine Ramsay (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2011), 55–78.

<sup>12</sup> Marsh, "Bits and Pieces of Truth," 351.

the depressed markets for wheat, barley, flax, canola, and other crops, have created difficult socio-economic conditions for independent farmers which ha[ve] led to a growing pattern of relocation—from the rural to the urban.”<sup>13</sup> Wrapped up in this migration pattern is the fact that, in the past five to ten years, Saskatchewan has witnessed an economic boom (or bubble), leading to an inflated real estate market, ever-increasing suburban developments (homes, super-sized shopping facilities, etc.) at the edges of the major cities, and, ironically, both the demise of and the push for revitalization projects in the downtown cores of Regina and Saskatoon. Yet what has also been happening “under the radar,” so to speak, is a push back and quiet resistance by artists, entrepreneurs, and people interested in the slow food movement who share concerns about sustainability of the land. These folks are moving *from* urban centres *to* small towns and rural communities, and Little Miss Higgins and Foy Taylor are among these people—two artists who made this transition from Regina to Nokomis.

#### From the Urban to the Rural:

“**Tumbleweed’s a’ rollin’, I can’t seem to keep my feet on the ground.**” Nokomis is a small town of 436 people according to the 2001 census and is located in south-central Saskatchewan, 136 kilometres north of Regina and 162 kilometres southeast of Saskatoon. More significantly, Nokomis is situated on both the Canadian National Railway main line, approximately 616 kilometres west of Winnipeg, and the Canadian Pacific Railway line, 136 kilometres north of Regina.<sup>14</sup> The town is also positioned on Highway 20, which runs north and south, at its junction with Highway 15, which runs east and west. Because it is located at such an important hub—where the two railway lines meet—Nokomis was once a bustling town with the potential to grow in a similar way to the city of Moose Jaw.<sup>15</sup> As is the case with many small towns and cities across Canada, however, once the passenger trains no longer stopped in Nokomis its evolution and progress changed dramatically.

On her 2007 album *Junction City*, and more specifically in the song “That Train’s a Comin’ Down,” Little Miss Higgins sings about the symbolism of the train and its impact on Nokomis, or Junction City, as it is nicknamed by the people who have lived there in the past as well as those who currently reside in the town. As she ex-

plains, “The passenger train no longer stops here, but freight, cargo, and grain cars move through every hour of the day. The lyrics and music . . . have been greatly influenced by the sound of the train and the stories (past and present) of this community.”<sup>16</sup> For Little Miss Higgins, the constant reminder of *what could have been* and *what actually is* is integral to how the stories of Nokomis and its surrounding communities are read and understood.

Musically, through the tempo, riffs, repetition, timbre, lyrics, and instrumental and vocal styles, Little Miss Higgins captures an idealized and romantic sense of what small-town prairie life was once like. She sings,

I’ve nowhere to be tonight.  
Nothing to see and no big sights.  
Just the creaks and the cracks and a matter of fact  
That train’s a’ comin’ down the railroad track.<sup>17</sup>

The solitude that she describes is relieved (or disrupted, depending on how one chooses to interpret this statement) by the sound of the train coming through the town. Trying to articulate how she understands the train as a metaphor in and for her music, Little Miss Higgins suggests that “My style of music fits with the romantic nostalgia associated with the train. There is a wonderful synergy between my music and the sadness and joy of hearing the train roll through a prairie town, as the haunting call of the horn brings a comfort [to the folks still here] somehow.”<sup>18</sup> The train evokes a complicated history; symbolically, the train signifies freedom of movement, transportation of goods and people, and the myth of progress while simultaneously connoting imperialist agendas, colonization of people and lands, and more recently a costly and inefficient—not to mention dangerous—mode of transportation in North America. Thus, when Little Miss Higgins refers to the connection between the train and her style of music, a style born from a complicated and tension-filled history, she is attempting to present the nuances of this place.

When we look at the development of western Canada, it is important to acknowledge that the region, including Nokomis, was part of a national project of colonial (white) settlement. Primarily settled by German immigrants moving north from the United States,

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> See the Town of Nokomis website, <http://nokomisweb.com/history.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Moose Jaw is sixty-nine kilometres west of Regina and has become an important tourist destination in Saskatchewan.

<sup>16</sup> Little Miss Higgins, interview with Charity Marsh, Regina, January 27, 2007.

<sup>17</sup> Little Miss Higgins, “That Train’s a Comin’ Down,” *Junction City*, 2007.

<sup>18</sup> Higgins, interview with Charity Marsh, January 27, 2007.

Nokomis was named by its first postmistress. Nokomis is the Anishnabe word meaning “grandmother,” which the postmistress (a German immigrant) borrowed from the infamous *Hiawatha* poem by H.W. Longfellow.<sup>19</sup> The poem perpetuates the racist myths of the “noble savage” and “Indian squaw” that were part of the settlement ethos on the prairies and across the plains. As already mentioned, Nokomis is located within the territory of Treaty Six, and there are five reserves within a 200-kilometre radius of the town. Yet Nokomis is recognized and identified as a white community born from its settler history, agricultural roots, and junction town reputation. Thus, conventional stories relating to these ideals are subsequently mapped onto the landscape of Nokomis and area and, more generally, the prairies. Massey quotes Barbara Bender on the ways in which such landscapes can “refuse to be disciplined. They make a mockery of the oppositions that we create between time (History) and space (Geography), or between nature (Science) and culture (Social Anthropology).”<sup>20</sup> Indeed, what we hear in the music of Little Miss Higgins and what we witness in her performances suggest that this particular landscape provokes much more.

As the lyrical focus of the song shifts from the train to other aspects of life, including the landscape, the sun, the garden, the dirt, and working the land, it is at this moment that we are given a glimpse, in a brief moment of reflection by the narrator, of Little Miss Higgins herself:

My fingernails are filthy.  
My skin feels well and warm.  
Garden work and sun and dirt  
And now my soul is torn  
  
Between the beauty of the day  
And the mystic of the night  
And now it's time to take a flight  
Roaming through my mind, my mind, my mind.<sup>21</sup>

For Little Miss Higgins, the train symbolizes contemporary life and a disruption of its daily routines while presenting “the possibility of both an escape” and a reminder of a “lost way of life.”<sup>22</sup> She sings of

taking time to enjoy, to live, to feel, to be in the present while also remembering the past:

Slow those horses that drive this wagon on.  
Kill the fatted calf until the break of dawn.  
No need to hurry, just mosey along.  
Take your own sweet time and let the rush roll on.<sup>23</sup>

Romanticizing an “old” way of life in comparison with the contemporary, quick-paced, capitalist, corporate-driven life, she sings, “Let the fast be furious and crash. / I wanna see blue skies, big and wide. / I wanna hear that water splash.”<sup>24</sup> This song presents a particular vision of a past, one that is arguably simpler, and filled with hard work, but a vision that also insists on the value of taking time to enjoy life in and on the land. As Cruikshank argues, however, “the notion of a nature that is harmonious and in balance is often mobilised in the cause of a foundationalism in which a settled past is necessarily presupposed in order to enable a narrative of subsequent loss.”<sup>25</sup> To see such loss, we have only to juxtapose this nostalgia of an idealized time and place with the realities of small-town prairie life today. As discussed above, for the most part, young people are leaving small towns across the prairies in droves. If they do not leave or move on to a bigger centre, these youth are often regarded as being unmotivated, or stuck, and therefore less successful. People who represent the pillars of communities are aging, moving off the land, or dying. Farms are being overtaken by corporate agriculture business, and grain elevators are being torn down, literally and figuratively symbolizing the death or destruction of small towns on the prairies. This kind of narrative “entails a nostalgia and a backward-looking rather than forward-looking.”<sup>26</sup> As Little Miss Higgins continues to sing, however, she offers hope, promise, and an “understanding of both place and landscape as events, as happenings, as moments that will be again dispersed,”<sup>27</sup> which ultimately offer something more than just nostalgia:

the train's a comin' down the railroad track  
the train's a comin' down the railroad track

19 Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Hiawatha* (Chicago: Reilly and Britton, 1909).

20 Doreen Massey, “Landscape as a Provocation,” 34.

21 Higgins, “That Train’s a Comin’ Down.”

22 Higgins, interview with Charity Marsh, January 27, 2007.

23 Higgins, “That Train’s a Comin’ Down.”

24 Ibid.

25 Cruikshank, *Do Glaciers Listen?*, 10.

26 Ibid., 10–11.

27 Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005), 21.

the train's a comin' down the railroad track  
the train's a comin' down the railroad track<sup>28</sup>

The train still comes through Nokomis over and over again every day. Its symbolic value, though diminished, is not completely lost or forgotten.

**Little Miss Higgins: "Stay away from me, 'cause it's just me and my sin."** Jolene Higgins was born in Alberta but grew up in Independence, Kansas, returning to Alberta in her teens. Dave Taylor was born and raised in Winnipeg. She explains: "We're imports to Saskatchewan. We're kind of like hockey players."<sup>29</sup> Even though they refer to themselves as imports, they both refer to Nokomis as home. In fact, in every interview that I have done with Jolene, she speaks about her relationship to Nokomis and the time that she has lived in the town by referencing how many gardens they have grown. This interconnectivity between time spent in Nokomis and nurturing the land (along with the reciprocity wherein the garden nourishes the body) is essential when contemplating how one begins to relate to a place and have a place become home. Little Miss Higgins identifies with the prairie landscape and the idea of being part of the prairies: "I'm a prairie girl for sure, I love it. I think that's why I'm so drawn to Saskatchewan. Plus the rent's cheap. Don't tell too many people, though, we want to keep it that way."<sup>30</sup> Although this last comment was meant as a joke, it is a powerful statement. An artist's living expenses are often no match for an artist's earnings, even for an artist who does not live extravagantly. Living in a rural community in Saskatchewan helps to bring these things into balance for Little Miss Higgins, offering freedom from some financial burdens of an urban lifestyle. Because the cost of living in Nokomis is low, Little Miss Higgins is able to invest more time and energy into song writing, rehearsing, performing, staying connected to her fans through interactive media sites, and undertaking all the other administrative tasks of being a musician.

While visiting Jolene Higgins and Dave Taylor at their home in Nokomis in 2006, the merging of musical style (at least how blues and country styles are typically represented) and lifestyle was immediately apparent to me. Nokomis is a small town, everyone knows each other, and there is an emphasis on what could be referred to

<sup>28</sup> Higgins, "That Train's a Comin' Down."

<sup>29</sup> Higgins, speaking at the Little Miss Higgins Workshop, 2006.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

as country living—gardening, tinkering, cooking, visiting with neighbours, farming, and so on. During one of our interviews, I asked Little Miss Higgins about this connection, and she responded that "Living here [in Nokomis] I have found a narrative thread between my style of music and my surroundings."<sup>31</sup> Reflecting on the work of Walter Benjamin and Mikhail Bakhtin, Cruikshank argues that "Narrative is grounded in material circumstances of everyday life and is capable of addressing questions about the consequences of historical events."<sup>32</sup> The connection of the blues and vaudeville genres with small-town living and the Saskatchewan landscape that Little Miss Higgins discusses plays an integral role in her development as a musician, along with her performance practice and style. For her, there is a dynamic relationship between how she lives and writes and performs. Higgins and Taylor grow a large garden and are fully immersed in their community. Taylor became the mayor of Nokomis. When at home and not on tour, they visit with neighbours and friends, participate in community events, help to tend the bar, compose songs, rehearse for performances, and administer Little Miss Higgins Inc. There is something symbiotic, almost "authentic," about how they live their lives as blues musicians in this small prairie town.

#### "I'm gonna' bake my biscuits.":

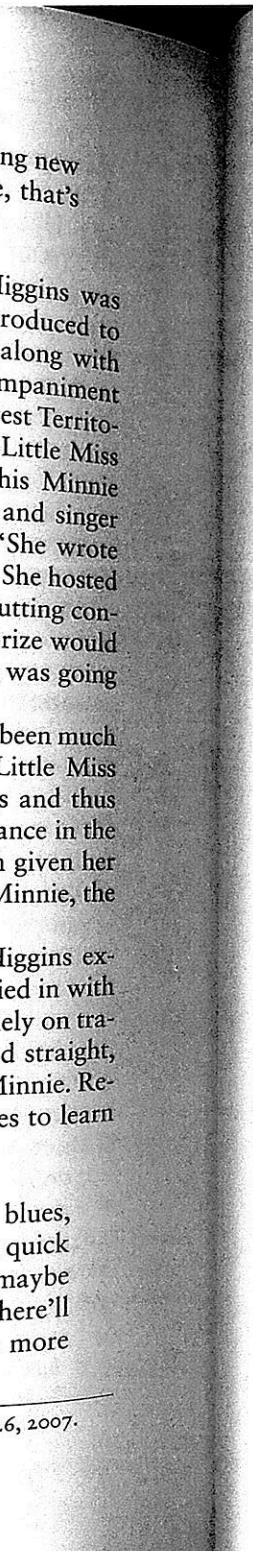
#### **Little Miss Higgins Learns the Memphis Minnie-Style Blues**

Although Little Miss Higgins was trained classically on piano, she began playing and teaching herself guitar when she was fourteen. In one interview, she explains how she went about learning how to play the blues on her own as well:

[W]ith the guitar, I guess I taught myself through theory and . . . learning chords, . . . but then learning blues music and country blues, jazz, blues, and all that stuff, there was never a way to learn it by note or by sheet music . . . I mean you can find a lot of old songs on the Internet, you know that old stuff. I'm still learning that way. That's how I learn a lot of songs. And whether they become pieces on the stage

<sup>31</sup> Higgins, interview with Charity Marsh, January 27, 2007.

<sup>32</sup> Cruikshank, *Do Glaciers Listen?*, 5. See Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," in *Illuminations*, trans. H. Zohn, ed. H. Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), 82–109; Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogical Imagination*, trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist, ed. M. Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981); and Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. H. Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).



or just part of learning, learning a new mix and learning new progressions that may transform into something else, that's how I do it mostly, yeah, just by ear.<sup>33</sup>

As her ear and guitar playing developed, Little Miss Higgins was drawn to blues-based genres, and eventually she was introduced to the songs and guitar-playing style of Memphis Minnie (along with Kansas Joe McCoy, who often played rhythm guitar accompaniment for Memphis Minnie) while living in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories. One of the most significant musical figures to shape Little Miss Higgins's music, writing, and performance style, Memphis Minnie was an influential American blues musician, songwriter, and singer whose career was most active in the 1930s and 1940s. "She wrote over 180 songs, and she was an amazing guitar player . . . . She hosted jam sessions in this little club, and she would have these cutting contests with other musicians, like Big Bill Broonzy, and the prize would always be a bottle of gin. And there's no way anyone else was going to get that prize."<sup>34</sup>

Similar to other popular music genres, there has always been much musical sharing, borrowing, and covering in the blues. Little Miss Higgins has covered a number of Memphis Minnie songs and thus (re)introduced her audience to a musician of great significance in the history of the blues, a performer who has not always been given her due. On stage, Little Miss Higgins talks about Memphis Minnie, the value of her music, and her overall impact on the blues.

When describing her own musical style, Little Miss Higgins explains that "we play the old blues stuff and country blues tied in with some jazz and vaudeville styles."<sup>35</sup> Rather than focusing solely on traditional blues patterns, such as the twelve-bar blues played straight, she looks to the technique and musical style of Memphis Minnie. Repeated listening is one method that Little Miss Higgins uses to learn Memphis Minnie's music:

[Y]ou figure out okay, yeah, it's kind of a twelve-bar blues, but there is this that is different, and there's this. There's quick fives, there's quick fours, there's this and this . . . . Or maybe she doesn't go to the five or go to the four ever. And there'll be a song that follows more of a jazz progression or more

of that jazzy vaudeville kind of progression, but at least you kind of have a basis of chord progressions to work off of.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, Little Miss Higgins learns the style much in the same way that Memphis Minnie learned how to play the blues, by listening to others play and, in the case of Higgins, by repeatedly listening to recordings of blues artists.

Prior to the arrival of Higgins and Taylor in Nokomis, the blues and vaudeville were not popular genres listened to or performed often at the Nokomis Beverage Room, the one bar in town and an important gathering place for the community. When they first began to live, write, rehearse, and perform in Nokomis, a few of the folks initially had suspicions, reservations, and at times outright resistance to the new musicians and their choice of musical genres. Higgins explains: "I remember one of the first times we played in the [Nokomis] bar, someone, one of the old guys, was like 'You're playing "nigger" music.' It was a jam session, and I just said, 'Well, so?'"<sup>37</sup>

This man's response to Higgins's style of music is highly problematic, yet it is not necessarily surprising considering the contentious race politics that are part of Saskatchewan's cultural landscape and the colonial history and development of North America. In our conversations about this experience, Taylor explained that, though this kind of racism is unacceptable and frustrating, there is something understandable about why some locals might share this attitude: not having known difference, or ignoring difference, can simply lead to isolation and ignorance and the inability to handle difference productively:

**TAYLOR:** People out there are good people, it's just some people's attitudes. I mean, if you condemn people for what they believe, you'll never talk to them again. You're never going to deal with eradicating the problem.

**HIGGINS:** And it's what they've been exposed to.

**ANDERSON:** Or not exposed to.

**HIGGINS:** And us coming in there and playing this music, you know at first they were like "What is this?" [And] then when I say "This is a Memphis Minnie" song . . . things change.

<sup>33</sup> Little Miss Higgins, interview with the Charity Marsh, Regina, July 26, 2007.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Higgins, speaking at the Little Miss Higgins Workshop, 2006.

<sup>36</sup> Higgins, interview with Charity Marsh, July 26, 2007.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

**TAYLOR:** Yeah. Now we got people because the CD [*Cobbler Shop Sessions*, 2005] is in the jukebox [at the Nokomis Beverage Room], and you got people plugging “Baked My Biscuits,” and they’re all singing “Baked My Biscuits.” A ninety-year-old country blues song from a lady from Memphis. And they love it. Had we gone in there with some high-brow attitude that we were better, or they were lesser because of their attitudes, then it would be miserable living there. Sometimes you have to work at certain things, and I think that’s the beginning of how things can get better.

**HIGGINS:** You just go, and you do it. It doesn’t need to be with attitude. And they didn’t have to like it. We could have played there, and they could have not liked us and said, “We don’t want you to play here anymore.” But that didn’t happen.<sup>38</sup>

Although there are often tensions when one attempts to integrate into a new community and a new cultural landscape, as Higgins and Taylor suggest, shifting attitudes along the lines of race politics, gender politics, and a politics of difference more generally can be approached in multiple ways with varying results. Living in Nokomis has created some challenges for the musicians, yet it also offers some significant privileges: “We couldn’t really ask for much more, though. It lets us be full-time musicians, pretty much, and the neighbours are friendly. If you pull out a hammer, the pick-ups start pulling up, and everyone’s got a beer in one pocket and advice in the other. It fits pretty well.”<sup>39</sup> Whether in a small town or a big urban centre, difference of any kind is often treated with suspicion, fear, and concern. In an urban centre, problematic responses are often masked or made less visible within a false perception of inclusivity, diversity, and tolerance. It would be terribly naive to think that attitudes like the one presented to Little Miss Higgins in the Nokomis Beverage Room by one elderly man are more common in small towns than in urban centres. And what has evolved throughout the process of Higgins and Taylor making their home in Nokomis is that through the blues, a genre of great significance in narrating colonial histories and oppressions, the citizens of

Nokomis actively participate in complex dialogues about race, gender, narrations of history, and constructions of place and space. Nokomis is being represented on local and global stages. Furthermore, through media coverage of Little Miss Higgins’s music (and ultimately her life in Nokomis) by CBC’s Holger Petersen, the host of *Saturday Night Blues*, Nokomis has become known as a blues hotbed.

#### Reading Landscape: Velvet Barley Bed

“Being a musician based in a small community in rural Saskatchewan, I cannot ignore my surroundings.”<sup>40</sup> It is this declaration that clearly identifies an ethical responsibility that Jolene Higgins feels to her surroundings as both an artist and an active member of the community that she calls home. When asked about her creative process and how she writes songs, Higgins refers back to her surroundings:

I find whenever there’s water running . . . there’s a song in the water somehow. Whether it’s the shower or washing dishes or outside and I’ve got the sprayer on, I always start to sing or something. And usually these little bits happen, and I try to remember the little bits and then take it to the guitar. Then once I’ve figured it out on the guitar, I can usually remember it . . . usually. And then if not, I let it go, and if it’s gone it’s gone. And then if it’s words I write them down. I try to write them down. I’ve got a little tape recorder now that I sing into if I have it around, . . . try to keep it nearby so I don’t lose things. ’Cause it’s easy to lose them.<sup>41</sup>

Her fondness for Nokomis, her neighbours, and the surrounding landscape are expressed in a number of songs in her albums and highlighted in her performances. From the frivolity of “Bargain Shop Panties,” identifying a little bargain shop in the nearby town of Watrous, to the more contemplative and explicitly political commentary on historical relations in Canada in “Snowin’ Today: A Lament for Louis Riel,” two of the songs from her 2010 album *Across the Plains*, the influence of the Saskatchewan landscape has been profound. If, as Cruikshank claims, “landscapes are places of remembrance,” and “culturally significant landforms may provide a kind of archive where memories can be mentally stored,”<sup>42</sup> then Little Miss Higgins’s musical tributes

38 Little Miss Higgins, Foy Taylor, and Darci Anderson, interview with Charity Marsh, Regina, January 28, 2007.

39 Cited in David Berry, “Little Miss Higgins Looks at the World through a Pair of Sepia-Tinted Glasses,” *Vue Weekly*.com 607 (2007), [http://vneweekly.com/music/story/little\\_miss\\_higgins\\_looks\\_at\\_the\\_world\\_through\\_a\\_pair\\_of\\_sepia\\_tinted\\_glasses/](http://vneweekly.com/music/story/little_miss_higgins_looks_at_the_world_through_a_pair_of_sepia_tinted_glasses/).

40 Higgins, interview with Charity Marsh, July 26, 2007.

41 Ibid.

42 Cruikshank, *Do Glaciers Listen?*, 11.

to the prairie landscape re/present layers of histories and memories while simultaneously creating new ones. In the song “Velvet Barley Bed,” Little Miss Higgins sings about how the topography of the land and the fields of barley make her feel as she drives down Highway 20, the road leading into Nokomis:

Well I feel so at home  
Driving down that road  
And see a velvet barley bed  
I want to rest my weary head<sup>43</sup>

The image that she creates is one that any person who has travelled through or even seen photographs of Saskatchewan’s crops just prior to harvest can relate to, remember, and envision. The song also captures her evolving relationship to her home and the prairie landscape.

Rather than understanding landscape as something that we merely travel across, I believe that Massey offers us an exciting alternative: “[B]oth space and landscape could be imagined as provisionally intertwined simultaneities of ongoing, unfinished, stories.”<sup>44</sup> Acknowledging that these stories are unfinished and ongoing contributes to the idea of “nature as endlessly geographically mobile,” further problematizing “any notion of intrinsic indigeneity (in the sense of having been eternally present), any question of things being essentially and only local,” and the concept of “local belonging,” which “undermine[s] certain political claims to place.”<sup>45</sup> Breaking the pattern of “inwardlookingness,” or what Cruikshank suggests is “a tendency to focus only on the confines of the particular landscape, or place, itself,”<sup>46</sup> allows for the possibility of new meanings, interpretations, and relationships.

In the song “Snowin’ Today,” the listener is presented with such a possibility. From the combination of musical styles and instruments of Dixieland and French and Métis folk song, and the singing style and timbre of Little Miss and Foy’s voices, in its music, lyrics, and performance Little Miss narrates a story firmly and politically rooted in the Saskatchewan landscape—the story of Métis leader Louis Riel:

...  
it might not be long before we’re all gone  
the touch wood hills

<sup>43</sup> Little Miss Higgins, “Velvet Barley Bed,” *Junction City*, 2007.

<sup>44</sup> Massey, “Landscape as a Provocation,” 21.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>46</sup> Cruikshank, *Do Glaciers Listen?*, 15.

there was a war  
or so it was declared  
over the hills across the plains

...  
Louis Riel should of had a knife  
to cut that rope and cut it twice  
and tie it around the necks  
of those to blame

...  
well i don’t know what of the truth’s been told  
i just read his words and so  
i know he was a leader so great

...  
snowin’ today  
snow like feathers  
and the cold has slackled its tethers  
visions of past  
through the old looking glass  
take my cares away with the weather<sup>47</sup>

Rather than focusing solely on the “factual” story of Riel, Little Miss Higgins makes connections among the landscape, the weather, the narrative, and how the story is retold. The lament is for a great leader who has come to signify much more than one political moment in history. The story of Riel and what he represents in this place will never be finished.

However, in a piece such as “The Dirty Ol’ Tractor,” Little Miss Higgins breaks from this pattern of focusing solely on the boundaries of the place:

Ain’t no change but it’s changing  
Ain’t no cloud but it’s raining  
well i look up and there ain’t a thing in the sky  
well maybe i’m blind and I don’t know why  
I ain’t got no song but I’m singing  
My bell got broke but I’m a ringing<sup>48</sup>

At the same time, she integrates the here and now, reminding us of the rewards of such labours:

<sup>47</sup> Little Miss Higgins, “Snowin’ Today: A Lament for Louis Riel,” *Across the Plains*, 2010.

<sup>48</sup> Little Miss Higgins, “The Dirty Ol’ Tractor,” *Junction City*, 2007.

I show up before the sun goes down  
and I know it's okay to put some seeds in the ground  
What you gonna' plant?  
some potatoes, maybe some peas, corn, basil and whatever I  
please<sup>49</sup>

Toward the end of the song, Little Miss Higgins sings the provocative and critical statement “they just want more of what they don’t really need.”

Thus, building on Cruikshank’s argument that landscape, and more specifically the glaciers found in the Saint Elias Mountains, “have provided imaginative grist for comprehending and interpreting shifting social circumstances,”<sup>50</sup> I propose that the prairie landscape of Nokomis and area, as seen and heard through the musical discourse of Little Miss Higgins, has transformed “seemingly neutral spaces into places of significance”<sup>51</sup> and, in turn, represents new and complex meanings of Saskatchewan and its shifting place in current national (and international) narratives.

#### **Little Miss Higgins Presents “In the Middle of Nowhere” in the Nokomis Beverage Room and “Bargain Shop Panties” in Watrous**

The debut music video for Little Miss Higgins was for the song “In the Middle of Nowhere.” By setting the video in Nokomis, specifically in the Nokomis Beverage Room, Little Miss Higgins plays with her audience, taking us back to an earlier time while making us aware that we are also in the present. The *mise en scène*, with its technologies, costumes, props, gestures, and images, transforms Nokomis, recalling the 1930s and 1940s through various symbols and signifiers. The video, shot in black and white, provides an additional layer to an already familiar narrative, that of the blues with all its tensions, playfulness, and heartache. The video foregrounds the musicians playing for a mixed audience (rural folks, urbanites, farmers, and those somewhere in between); the tension-filled poker game (which ends up being won by the most experienced of the players); and the realities of rural life (such as being stuck in the mud or snow). Numerous close-up shots of both Little Miss Higgins and Foy Taylor playing guitar for the audience in the bar flash throughout the video. The video narrative also shows Little Miss Higgins coming into the bar in various time

periods. The effect is one of merging past and present to create a sense of timelessness—a timelessness that accompanies nostalgic notions of living in small rural towns.

Musically, the song is in a standard twelve-bar blues form, with an introduction, a chorus, a verse, a bridge, and an outro. The lyrics describe the vastness of the prairie landscape, the isolation, the quiet, and the importance of keeping your head:

The beer's all gone and the barkeep's broke  
Don't gamble your roll, Don't ya throw away stones  
You'll get lost on that road  
You'll go down with the show  
In the middle of nowhere  
Nowhere! . . .

Miles and miles of emptiness.  
You might hear an echo from the distance.  
Don't you go down that road  
You might get seized by the snow  
In the middle of nowhere  
Nowhere!<sup>52</sup>

Throughout the video, Little Miss Higgins introduces the world to some actual personalities, narratives, and stories of Nokomis, while it concludes ironically, with the camera panning to a poster on the wall behind Little Miss and Foy advertising the very performance that we are seeing. Thus, we continue to see her walking the line of romanticizing while complicating a world being told through a particular lens—a double lens that mixes fictions and realities. To go back to a time of the Great Depression, of prohibition, of small-town gangsterism is to present a partial tale. For her, there is more to Nokomis than being lost in the past “in the middle of nowhere.”

The music video for “Bargain Shop Panties,” released in July 2011, also plays with notions of time. Beginning with a shot of Little Miss in period costume doing laundry with an old washboard and water pump in front of an old barn and a clothes line, the audience bears witness to her frustrations with her old, worn-out, drab-coloured panties. After watching her drive off in an old Dodge truck, obviously heading to the Bargain Shop in Watrous, an important signifier of the

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Cruikshank, *Do Glaciers Listen?*, 11.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Higgins, “In the Middle of Nowhere.”

“bigger” small towns in Saskatchewan, to buy some new panties, the audience sees present-day Little Miss standing on top of a vintage car playing her electric guitar. A seemingly frivolous song about panties and the place from which these panties come—the Bargain Shop—this song and the video also play with ideas of past and present and explicitly detail the importance of functional panties while simultaneously offering much innuendo, a common practice of the blues genre:

Now don’t get my panties in a knot  
Don’t think they’re what they’re not  
They’ve got a clear-cut job  
And they fit the perfect spot  
Oh Bargain Shop Panties  
Yeah Bargain Shop Panties  
So lovely so divine  
I buy them all the time  
My Bargain Shop Panties  
So lovely so divine  
They’ll fit you just fine  
My Bargain Shop Panties  
So lovely so divine  
I think they’ll blow your mind  
My Bargain Shop Panties<sup>53</sup>

Throughout the video, there are a number of guest appearances by fans, young and old, rural and urban, men and women, both in the actual Bargain Shop and on the farm. Some are costumed to match Little Miss in her kerchief, while others are dressed in contemporary fashion of the everyday. She calls out to them “Bargain Shop Panties,” and in traditional blues style these participants respond to her call, singing back “Bargain Shop Panties.”

In both of these songs and their subsequent videos, transitions between past and present, then and now, suggest that Little Miss Higgins is challenging the idea that a narrative, even one so connected to a specific place (Nokomis or Watrous or any small town in Saskatchewan), is bound to one representation. For her and her fans, the stories—nostalgic, frivolous, contemplative, celebratory, fictional, and real—reveal the many complex and living layers of Saskatchewan histories.

<sup>53</sup> Little Miss Higgins, “Bargain Shop Panties,” *Across the Plains*, 2010.

#### Conclusion: “Here we go around again.”

Because Little Miss Higgins is a blues-based artist living in a town whose history is bound to a project of white settlement and a town surrounded by reservations (in other words, a white woman, drawing on primarily black art forms, living in a white settler colonial town, surrounded by the colonized or other), concepts such as landscape, place, and space become integral parts of how one interprets the complex meanings of her music. Nokomis has a historical context, just as the blues and vaudeville are marked by and through histories. Little Miss Higgins and her music brush up against these racialized, mythical, and romanticized spaces, not by ignoring racial boundaries but by challenging reified meanings and telling new stories that have become immersed in this landscape. The result, as Cruikshank suggests, is the creation of stories “that participants tell orally or in writing about their experiences”—stories that, in turn, “encounter successive audiences whose interpretations of what they hear or read are shaped by their own contemporary concerns.”<sup>54</sup> Drawing on Benjamin, Cruikshank goes on to state that stories, and I would argue songs, “allow listeners to embellish events, to reinterpret them, to mull over what they hear and to learn something new each time, providing raw material for developing philosophy.”<sup>55</sup> Reflecting on how Higgins and Taylor worked through some of the problematic initial responses to their music when they first began to play in Nokomis and eventually moved to the small town illustrates this very idea. As Cruikshank writes, “In some cases, meetings between humans or landscapes may generate insights on all sides. But encounters, as Gillian Beer notes, do not guarantee understanding and may instead emphasize what is incommensurate.”<sup>56</sup>

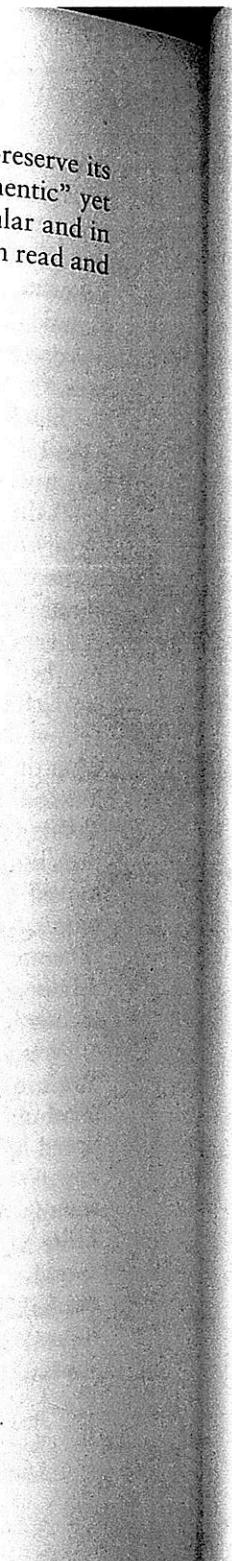
Yet, when walking into the Nokomis Beverage Room today, the music of Little Miss Higgins can regularly be heard playing on the jukebox. Nokomis is one of many Saskatchewan towns that have adopted her version of the Memphis Minnie tune “Bake My Biscuits,” and, at most of her performances, this favourite call-and-response tune is requested. The lyrics are playful and filled with metaphors. Little Miss sings “I’m gonna’ bake my biscuits,” and the audience responds “I’m gonna’ bake my biscuits.” Then she ends with “I’m gonna’ bake my biscuits. And I ain’t gonna’ give nobody none.”<sup>57</sup> Thus, to hear and to sing along—to bake one’s biscuits—are, in a real sense,

<sup>54</sup> Cruikshank, *Do Glaciers Listen?*, 10.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>57</sup> Little Miss Higgins, “Bake My Biscuits,” *Cobbler Shop Sessions*, 2005.



to belong to this place and to recognize, hold close, and preserve its value. Higgins and her music have thus become an “authentic” yet slyly ironic piece of Saskatchewan’s contemporary vernacular and in turn might influence how audiences from all over the nation read and understand Saskatchewan—gap or no gap.

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