

## LOCATING GENDER IN A NATIVE AMERICAN COMMUNITY: THE PLACES OCCUPIED BY WOMEN IN LESLIE MARMON SILKO'S CEREMONY

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### ABSTRACT

This article's aim is to analyze the space, place and gender relations in Native American culture in the novel *Ceremony*, by Leslie Marmon Silko, and the concepts discussed by Doreen Massey, Jody Berland, Alison Blunt and Gillian Rose. The novel, whose focus is on the healing process of a Native American young man, a World War II veteran, shows how the space, place and gender relations in the Native American culture differ from the ones we see in the patriarchal family structure common to the western culture. In this way, I intend to discuss this difference between the spaces and places occupied by women and man in both cultures.

**Keywords:** Native American Literature, gender, place, space.

In order to discuss gender we have to take into consideration different aspects that influence gender relations such as space and place, as argues Doreen Massey. For Massey (1994), space cannot be regarded as static; it is rather “inherently dynamic”, because of its relationship with time and social relations. Massey (1994) states that space should be viewed as “space-time” and that “what is at issue is not social phenomena in space but both social phenomena and space as constituted out of social relations, that the spatial is social relations 'stretched out'” (p. 2). Massey goes on saying that “since social relations are inevitably and

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everywhere imbued with power and meaning and symbolism, this view of the spatial is as an ever-shifting social geometry of power and signification.” (1994, p. 3).

Consequently, this “spatial organization of society” is not a mere result of the social, but integral to its production. Moreover, “It is fully implicated in both history and politics” (MASSEY, 1994, p. 4). In a similar fashion, Berland (2005) conceptualizes space, along with time, as being “simultaneously a physical phenomenon, social practice, and symbolic idea” (p. 331-332). She also presents space “as a distinct physical dimension” which “the body, the self” occupies in relation to “the lives of others”. (BERLAND, 2005, p. 333). Space, or space-time, then, can be thought of as being “constructed out of the multiplicity of social relations across all spatial scales” (MASSEY, 1994, p.23) and as influencing these social relations at the same time that they shape one’s perception of their own space in relation to others.

Massey (1994) defines the idea of place, then, as “a particular articulation of those relations, a particular moment in those networks of social relations and understandings” (1994, p. 5). She stresses the fact that “the particular mix of social relations which are thus part of what defines the uniqueness of any place is by no means all included within that place itself”; it includes the relations from outside, “the global as part of what constitutes the local”. Therefore, “places are open and porous”. They are not fixed; they can be defined “through the specificity of the mix of links and interconnections to” what lies “beyond” the so-called “local”. The view of place advocated by Massey “is a view which stresses the construction of specificity through interrelations rather than through the imposition of boundaries and the counter position of one identity *against* another” (1994, p. 7). She also considers place as a double articulation, since the construction of subjects within it should be taken into account when defining place. Place, then, is related to “Being” and identity, and the ideas of place-identity should be seen always as

“constructed by reference to the past.” (1994, p. 8-9). Berland (2005), similarly, contests the idea of “ ‘place’ as just a place on a map, or where one is situated as a physical body”. She explains that:

each place’s dynamics, meanings, and possibilities are affected by regional and global relations. Places aren’t just territorial, they are also political; some are more empowered than others to decide who belongs and who doesn’t. Places are contested, intersecting, and uncertain, clearly shaped by power relations and human intents. (BERLAND, 2005, p. 257)

Places, thus, can be defined “as particular moments in such intersecting social relations, nets of which have over time been constructed, laid down, interacted with one another, decayed and renewed” (MASSEY, 1994, p. 120). They are also connected with the identity of the subjects within it and the interrelations with other places.

These concepts of space and place, in this way, are paramount to understanding how one individual is circumscribed on particular places according to the gendered messages such places transmit (MASSEY, 1994, p. 182). Massey (1994) also discusses the relationship between the confinement to certain places and the limitation on identity stating that “the limitation of women’s mobility, in terms both of identity and space, has been in some cultural contexts a crucial means of subordination” (1994, p. 179). This limitation on identity is caused by the limitation on mobility, since “identity is constructed through embodied experience and connection with others, which is tied to locale (...) and the sense of belonging” as states Berland (2005). Berland also claims “the rise of the private sphere was inseparable from the rise of a specific construction of femininity, while public life and mobility have been largely gendered as masculine.” (2005, p. 257) Likewise, Blunt e Rose (1994) recognize this relation among space, place, and gender as a social process, “the social construction of gender difference” which “establishes some

spaces as women's and others as men's" (1994, p. 3). Men in patriarchal society were usually doted of mobility and able to circulate in the public sphere as women were confined to the private sphere.

However, such distinction between private and public does not apply to all relations between men and women. The value given to these spheres as gendered spaces "must be seen as central to the constitution of the 19th-century middle class as white", as this division is specific both in terms of class, and in terms of race. Such division had its origins from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century onward in Europe and North America and "enabled the bourgeoisie to distinguish themselves from other social groups." However, "attempts to universalize its neat distinction between two spaces and two genders erase its implicit race and class specificities", since it does not consider the "range of spaces structured by" a particular set of experiences of exploitation and resistance to racism and imperialism. (BLUNT; ROSE, 1994, p. 3-4) An example of a different type of occupation of the private and public spheres can be seen in the novel *Ceremony*, by Leslie Marmon Silko, set in Laguna Pueblo, a Native-American reservation in Northwestern New Mexico. The novel is set in the period after the Second World War and depicts women who occupy places known to be exclusive to men in western culture. Even though the plot focuses mainly on Tayo and his struggles after coming back from the war, it is possible to see, throughout the novel, such places in opposition to the places occupied by Native American men. Laguna Pueblo was a "matriarchy, where women owned property and children belonged to the mother's clan" (2006, p. xviii) as Silko (2006), who is originally from the reservation where the novel is set, states in the preface to the third edition of her novel. Such statement gives some instances of how the configuration of the gendered spaces differed in a Native American community.

As explains Tsosie (1988), Native American women have been categorized according to Euro-American stereotypes that placed them either as the “noble” Princess, like Pocahontas, or the “savage” Squaw. While the Princess gets closer of the European ideal of the “pure” woman, the Squaw is the equivalent to the “whore”, the one associated to sexuality, promiscuity and paganism (p. 3, 4). Such stereotypes were so widespread in Anglo-American culture that they started being considered the truth, even though both of them are far from what the Indian women represent in the Native American communities.

Importantly, a primary distinction between the definition of women by Europeans and that by Indians was the Indian emphasis on individuality. While Europeans defined women in relation to male figures, American Indians generally perceived women and men as individuals with specific talents, abilities and clan-sanctioned roles. Because Europeans failed to realize this Native emphasis on individuality, they largely ignored the fact that Indian women often played key roles in all of the major political, religious and economic institutions of the tribe. (TSOSIE, 1988, p. 6)

In *Ceremony*, it is possible to see how these stereotypes are subverted, since the female characters, as pointed out by Tsosie (1988), play important roles within the family and the community.

First, it must be taken into consideration that Western patriarchal structures, which circumscribe women to the private sphere denying them a place in the public realm (culture, politics and economy, for instance), do not necessarily apply to Native American communities. The female prestige starts with the Native American religious traditions in which the female deities have a primary role; while in the Christian dogma god is a male figure. In *Ceremony*, the poem that opens the story, describes how that story was created by Ts’its’tsi’nako, Thought-Woman, the spider. She, along with her sisters, creates the Universe by naming things: they would appear as soon as she named each of them. Here we can see the difference

between Native American and Judeo-Christian religious traditions, since in the version of the creation presented in Genesis, in which the creator is male.

In the central narrative, the household presented in the novel is essentially matriarchal, and the decisions are made by either Grandma (the oldest matriarch) or Auntie (Grandma's eldest child), while Robert (Auntie's husband), Josiah (the younger brother) and Tayo (the adopted nephew) are constantly undermined by the female characters. Auntie, not Robert, is the one who is able to have public life and mobility. She poses as the family representative and circulates in the public sphere, instead of staying in the private realm, as would a married woman in the late 1940's. She feels responsible for securing the family's reputation before the Native American community and acts according to the Catholic morals and her own ideals of martyrdom. When Tayo's mother, Laura or Little Sister, abandons him, Auntie takes him in not because she wants to take care of him, but because she thought bringing up Tayo was her burden to carry, and she would be a good Christian that way. Her sister was the cause of shame for her family and by adopting her little sister's son, she would be fulfilling her duty. When Tayo comes back from the war, sick and without Rocky, she, again, takes care of him grudgingly, as an act moved by her Christian ethics. However, by doing so, she overlooks the sense of community inherent to the Pueblo life. Differently from the Native American tradition of taking care and protecting their community, Catholicism preaches that the individual will be saved for his/her actions. Auntie, thus, acts differently from other women in her community, as argues Seyersted (1980, p. 32):

The clear example here is Auntie, a "devout Christian" who wants to prove that, "above all else, she was a Christian woman" (pp. 31 and 80); that is, because she is ruled by narrow Christian moral norms, she is inordinately upset by the disgrace reflected upon her by her relatives and forgets the clan idea of keeping the group together and helping everyone.

In this sense, the place she occupies in the Pueblo differs from other Pueblo women, since the others might have assimilated Christianity without abandoning the Laguna traditions.

In opposition to the place Auntie occupies, Robert's space and mobility appears to be somewhat reduced. He is the one who takes care of the ranch and the animals, but not the one who makes the important decisions. His place in the family was even more restricted when Josiah (his brother-in-law) and Rocky (his son) were alive. "Tayo realized then that as long as Josiah and Rocky had been alive, he had never known Robert except as a quiet man in the house that belonged to old Grandma and Auntie." (p. 32) He kept quiet all the years since he had married Auntie, once nothing belonged to him, not even "the good family name". Robert's patience and gentleness, as much as his resignation, are characteristics often related to women in the western society.

Another character of great influence in the family is Grandma. As an elder she already occupies a place of prestige among her people. "Grandparents bear responsibility for childcare when the parents are busy, but execute their charge with gentleness, patience, and goodwill; they are also prominent in naming ceremonies." (SWAN, 1992, p. 313) Grandma calls the medicine man Ku'oosh to perform the Scalp ceremony in order to cure Tayo, when he comes back from the Veterans Hospital with post-traumatic stress. She is the one to keep the traditions and pass on the stories. In this way, Grandma is, as the other elders, responsible for the education of the youngest, according to the Pueblo traditions. Despite her sight loss, and her old age, which would be a cause of displacement in the western culture, she is regarded as a source of wisdom and her word is valued and respected. Even Auntie has to abide when she makes a decision.

In contrast, the feminine characters that seem to have less prestige are the ones affected by the Anglo culture and the American ideals. Little Sis, Tayo's mother, is lured by her teacher into imitating white women ways and falls into a path of prostitution and alcoholism.

(...) Tayo's mother seeks to establish her identity and importance through men; but eventually she faces reality when, "after she had been with them, she could feel the truth in their fists and in their greedy feeble love-making." She grows to feel marginal and inadequate both with the Indian people, who feel shame for her promiscuity and alcoholism, and with the White men who feel contempt for her, and finally dies a lonely, alcoholic death. (TSOSIE, 1988, p. 29)

Helen Jean, a girl Tayo's friends pick in a bar, represents this reality as well. She would go to the veterans' bars to hang out with them and get their money.

They drank until they couldn't walk without holding on to her. She asked them for money then, money to send back to Emma at Towac: for the little girls. Then they stumbled up the steps to the Hudson Hotel. If she took long enough in the toilet, they usually passed out on the bed. (TSOSIE, 1988, p. 165)

She would tolerate having sex with them just as an easy way of making money.

These two characters show how the disregard of the Native American traditions causes them the loss of their power within the community and their objectification not only by white man but also by Native American men.

The Native American veterans, on the other hand, resort to the alcohol to help numbing the trauma of the war and the displacement they feel after their return. As Native Americans, the Pueblo boys did not have many chances in the Anglo-American society. The army recruiting was for them a means of turning into first-class citizens. That was the reason why Rocky, Tayo's cousin/brother, enlisted. He believed it was a way of getting away from the Pueblo and getting some money to help his family. The outcome was that some, as Rocky, would never return, and the ones that did return would become outcasts, troublemakers, alcoholics. The



place they occupied before, fighting in the war as American soldiers, no long existed, and, as they returned, the place they occupied before the war was not really enough for them. In the bars, they would find solace in telling war stories, which usually involved white women, whom they had sex with. In this case, white women were treated as territory, and the stories, whether true or not, were more like a metaphor for the recovery of their lost land. In this sense, the white women, in the way they were talked about in such stories, were treated more like objects than people. They were, thus, as objectified by Native American men as Native American women were by white men.

Two other characters that represent the empowerment of women in the novel are Night Swan, Josiah's lover, and Ts'eh, the sacred woman who helps Tayo with the recovery of his uncle's cattle. Night Swan is a Mexican woman who lives by herself in a room that is the second story of a bar. She has a relationship that borders matrimony with Tayo's uncle, and is able to circulate in the public sphere. She is independent, sensual and she is the one to initiate Tayo sexually. Night-swan is a Mexican dancer and her night with Tayo borders the incest. Ts'eh appears as a mysterious woman who helps Tayo complete his ceremony and fight against the "destroyers", a figurative name for the ones who unbalance the relations in the Native American world causing pain and destruction. She is the one responsible to show Tayo love and his connection with the world, as well as with his own story. Their encounters have a dream-like quality that makes them seem not real or somewhat mystical. Swan (1992) and Herzog (2005) argue that both women can be seen as incarnations of Thought Woman/ Spider Woman, the mother-creatrix. "Night-Swan is partly a mythological figure, and the encounter with her is more than sexual: like Ts'eh, she is connected with life-bringing rain and damp earth, with the sky-and-mountain-color blue, and with the mountain itself" (HERZOG, 2005, p. 31).

On the other hand, Ts'eh is the one who collects the speckled cattle and keeps it safe for Tayo. She is able to show him later the value of the plants and in this way she restores his connection with nature. She shows him love, which is more than the lovemaking Night-Swan presented him with. This love is what helps him heal and overcome his entire trauma. She is also able to tell him about his future.

She is the source, the female fulcrum of this gynocratic system. As she thinks, reality is named: cosmogony is woven into her linguistic universe. Fashioning celestial and earthly bodies with their finely wrought spatial/temporal designs, the mater-creatix fabricates women, deities, animals, and humankind, all of which participate in the dialect of creation and are related to everything else material and spiritual (SWAN, 1992, p. 324)

Therefore, Ts'eh makes things happen and change Tayo's story as she intervenes with the revelation of Emo's plans of capturing him and sending him away.

Tayo, who carries this sense of displacement since he was a child, finally manages to gain some sense of belonging as he completes the ceremony and finds love. His place, however, remains the same one reserved for the men in his family. Taking care of the ranch and the animals and leaving the important decisions for the women to make. Nonetheless, he is now able to go to a place, which is women's domain, after Ts'eh had taught him how to survive in the plains: nature.

## Conclusion

According to Ballinger e Swann (1983) *apud* Herzog (2005), “The Laguna people are "woman-dominant; they're a woman-centered people" (p. 6). Their images of gender can help us overcome Western stereotypes of excessively rational, power-wielding men as well as of women who are mindless childbearers.” (p. 32) Also, the relation space, place and gender works in a different manner from the one we find in the Euro-American society. The public and private spaces are not circumscribed, as they usually are when it comes down to a patriarchal household structure. Women are not confined to the private space and men are not the only ones able to circulate around the public space. Men and women are seen as individuals with different talents and women can hunt, repair things and perform jobs that would be thought to be a man's duty.

Women make decisions, and they hold the prestige of one's name, just like Grandma and her privilege of giving the last word. Men might keep themselves confined to their space, as Robert does before it is required of him to take care of their property and animals.

Furthermore, the relation between Anglo-Americans and Native-Americans varies according to gender. Native women were viewed as objects to white men, and as soon as they started going to the same places as them and imitating white women's way, they lost the power and prestige they had among their pueblo. White women, on the other hand, were regarded as something Native-American men could take over as a way of getting even for the loss of their territory to white men. They were referred to constantly in the war stories. And whether the stories were true or not, they are also treated as objects.

On what concerns the place as well as the space occupied by Laguna veterans, it can be observed that the ones who tried to gain some space in the Anglo-American society by enlisting to go to the war lost their position as first-class citizens and had to return to their old place in the pueblo. However, it was not enough to them, so they resorted to drinking and causing trouble.

Finally, as a people that highly value women, the Laguna Pueblo community has deep in its religion female deities such as Spider-Woman, Yellow Woman and Thought-Woman, who are brave women who have the control of creation and nature. The contrast with the Anglo-American society is very stark when one compares this feminine way of regarding creation and the masculine representation of creation. The gendered spaces generated by the gender relations in Euro-American society are also viewed under a different light and women are not subordinated by them in the Native-American communities.

#### **RESUMO**

Este artigo propõe uma análise das relações de espaço, lugar e gênero na cultura indígena norte-americana a partir do romance *Ceremony*, escrito por Leslie Marmon Silko, e de conceitos discutidos por Doreen Massey, Jody Berland, Alison Blunt e Gillian Rose. O romance, que tem como foco o processo de reabilitação de um jovem nativo-americano, ex-combatente da Segunda guerra mundial, demonstra como as relações de gênero, espaço e lugar na cultura indígena norte-americana se diferem das que percebemos na estrutura familiar patriarcal observada na cultura ocidental. Dessa forma, pretendo discutir essa diferença entre os lugares e espaços ocupados pelas personagens femininas em contraposição àqueles ocupados pelas personagens masculinas em ambas as culturas.

**Palavras-chave:** literatura indígena norte-americana, gênero, lugar, espaço.

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