

**Gaining Ground: The Politics of Place and Space  
in U.S. Women's Literature and U.S. Culture, 1959-2001**

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to invisible women around the world who struggle to make their voices heard. This work is my humble effort to hear you and my sincerest privilege to honor you.

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I need to understand how a place on the map is also a place in history within which ... I am created and trying to create.

– Adrienne Rich, *Notes toward a Politics of Location*

We must be insistently aware of how space can be made to hide consequences from us, how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparent innocent spatiality of social life.

– Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*

Place-making is a way of constructing the past, the venerable means of doing human history, it is also a way of constructing social traditions and, in the process, personal and social identities.

–Keith Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache*

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## Introduction

### Place, Space and Women Writers

Before the development of ecocriticism in the late twentieth century, the topics of *place* and *space* in U.S. literature—generally considered only in relationship to nature writing, regionalism, or local color—were perceived mostly in terms of the outdoors (with the exception of specific movements like the Harlem Renaissance). Women’s literature of place in particular, texts such as Mary Austin’s *The Land of Little Rain* (1903) or Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974), often seemed *out of place*, like a quirky foreign relative visiting, never quite at home in the U.S. literary canon.<sup>1</sup> “First-wave” ecocriticism, which gained momentum in the 1980s and 1990s as part of the political movement to save the “natural environment” (Buell 2005: 21), partially revised this limited view of nature writing. Henry David Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, and Edward Abbey, among others, gained political currency in ecocritical circles as literary environmental activists. However, the acceptance of women writers into this canon of mainly white, male nature writers, with a few token exceptions, lagged behind.

At the turn into the twentieth-first century, revisionist or “second-wave” ecocriticism, in tandem with the growing environmental justice movement, which focuses on the social justice dimensions of environmental activism, created a dramatic shift in environmental

literary studies. Environmental literary critic Lawrence Buell points out that second-wave ecocriticism, or the more aptly named “environmental criticism,” takes “urban and degraded landscapes just as seriously as ‘natural’ landscapes.” Furthermore, this newly emergent form of environmental criticism views “the prototypical human figure” as “defined by social category and the ‘environment’” as “socially constructed.” While different in their emphases, both first- and second-wave environmental criticisms see “environmental referentiality” as important to the work of a text (2005: 22, 32). Whether calling attention to a degraded natural environment or giving voice to a people degraded by an “unnatural” one, environmentally focused criticism seeks to join theory and praxis in the project of consciousness-raising.

Given environmental criticism’s interest in eco-social issues, examining *how* place and space are influenced by social power structures, such as those based on race, class, sexuality, gender, and nationalism, reveals how human identity is inseparable from spatial and platial experience. Comprehension of the ways in which the human environmental relationship is shaped by social relationships also speaks to the interests of feminist and cultural geographers, who emphasize *space* as a social process. Feminist geographer Doreen Massey suggests that the concept of “space-time” may be understood as “a configuration of social relations” (Massey 1994: 3). Urban space theorist Edward Soja concurs that “all human geographies” are “filled

with politics and ideology” (1989: 4), not merely those we designate as such.

This surge in socially and politically aware spatial discourses may be traced not only in recent critical trends but also in literary ones. As I explain in the chapters that follow, there are a number of women writers in the latter half of the twentieth century whose work focuses specifically on what I call the politics of place and space. Collectively their literature suggests a literary feminist imperative that dovetails with other geographical critiques of the social processes embedded in human geographies. Yet relatively little sustained critical attention has been given to these later twentieth-century U.S. women writers in precisely this way.

To address this oversight, I examine representations of the politics of place, space, and identity in Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), Adrienne Rich’s *Your Native Land, Your Life* (1986), Helena María Viramontes’ *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995), and Louise Erdrich’s *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001). I argue that when examined together these texts expose how mainstream narratives of place and space in the U.S., which regularly appear as merely descriptive topographies, often signify unjust social processes that produce negative consequences for women, especially poor women of color; other marginalized groups; and the environment. Fueling these forms of injustice, as these writers make clear, are widely accepted



Western, patriarchal, capitalist paradigms, disseminated through dominant cultural narratives, which naturalize the hierarchical treatment of human beings and the exploitation of the nonhuman world.

My argument demonstrates that the cross-cultural, feminist perspectives of these literary works reveal ways of viewing place and space as political sites of rebellion against such eco-social hierarchies while offering more egalitarian views than those traditionally accepted in the West on the treatment of women, place and space. I examine how these women writers draw from nonEuroAmerican traditions and from feminist perspectives that privilege multiplicity and interrelations over EuroAmerican divisions and either/or categories of place, space, and human identity. For example, literary critic Mary Pat Brady argues that “Chicana literature has consistently offered social alternative methods of conceptualizing space not only by noting how social change must be spatialized” but also by “refusing a too-rigid binary between the material and the discursive” (6). The same may be said of Indigenous narratives. Paula Gunn Allen writes that for the Indigenous people of the Southwestern U.S.: “The land is not really the place (separate from ourselves) where we act out the drama of our isolated destinies. ... The Earth is, in a very real sense, the same as [ourselves]” (Gunn Allen 1980: 191). To this point, Buell, paraphrasing Leslie Marmon Silko on the difference between Native and EuroAmerican landscape

representation, suggests that there is often a “lack of connectedness” in the EuroAmerican “particularity of environmental detail,” which may, ironically, create a peculiar distance from its subject (2001: 21). My analysis shows how the U.S. women’s literature I discuss, which includes the work of Chicana and Native writers, offers alternatives to traditional EuroAmerican views which posit a separation between humans and nonhuman nature. I draw, too, on feminist cultural criticism from bell hooks, Norma Alarcón, and others, who offer compelling critiques of spatialized gender oppression rooted in traditional Western binaries of place, space, and identity. My work contributes to feminist criticisms that seek ways to challenge and redefine restrictive platial and spatial categories of gender and identity. My study also joins environmental and geographical discussions interested in advancing place and space as crucial sites of inquiry in literary and cultural analyses.

Employing a combination of environmental criticism, cultural geography theory, and feminist cultural criticism, my analysis emphasizes how the women’s literature I study disputes “an” American national identity. That is, it challenges a homogeneous nation-state that supports ideas of freedom, equality, geographical mobility, free enterprise, and nature appreciation, but in reality ignores class struggles, gender inequality, racial difference, the overconsumption of natural resources, and environmental injustice. This totalizing national

identity also underpins and reinforces the insider/outsider politics of borders, regions, neighborhoods, and corporeal spaces critiqued by the texts I examine. The work of Hansberry, Rich, Vிராமontes, and Erdrich contests a U.S. national identity historically rooted in patriarchal, capitalist, and colonial paradigms that posit the U.S. landscape's rightful inhabitants as white, upwardly mobile, and masculine (if not always male) and that promote the exploitation of nature and an underclass labor force, especially of women of color. In opposition to these dominant narratives stand these women's stories of marginalized places and spaces—the ghetto, the borderlands, the reservation—which effectively draw awareness to socio-spatial and environmental injustice.

Certainly recent environmental and ecofeminist literary criticism has done much to highlight the environmental justice themes of late-twentieth-century women writers and activists, such as Terry Tempest Williams, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Winona LaDuke, to name just three. Contemporary feminist and cultural geography theory has also helped literary critics to examine the alternative spatial imaginary in marginalized women's literature, such as in the works of Chicana writers Gloria Anzaldúa, Sandra Cisneros, and Cherríe Moraga. Yet these relatively new areas of interdisciplinary literary study—environmental criticism and cultural geography interpretations—need even more robust critical attention as allied methodologies, especially if we wish to understand how these approaches complement one another

in reading literary place and space. Buell points out that as a discipline ecocriticism, like feminism, resists singular definition; instead it tends toward interdisciplinarity and “gathers itself around a commitment to environmentality from whatever critical vantage point” (2005: 11).

Similarly, feminist geographers Lise Nelson and Joni Seager remind us that “from its earliest inception, a defining characteristic of feminist geography was its intellectual cross-fertilization and multi-disciplinarity,” which “remains one of its strengths today” (2005: 2). My discussion brings cultural geographers and feminist geographers into conversation with literary environmental and feminist cultural critics. This cross-disciplinary approach offers multiple tools for attending to the varied literal and figurative meanings of place and space in later-twentieth-century U.S. women’s literature and U.S. culture.

For my own definition of *place*, I take my cue from a number of sources, including Buell, who writes that the idea of place “gestures” in multiple directions, including “toward environmental materiality, toward social perception or construction, and toward individual affect or bond” (Buell 2005: 63). Buell questions “traditionally understood” concepts of place as a stable category, in part, because “fewer and fewer of the world’s population live out their lives in locations that are not shaped to a great extent by translocal— ultimately global— forces” (63). The idea that place is, in many cases, a fluid concept is especially important in my critical approach.

Any notion of place is also dependent on the concept of *space*. In order for us to envision a place—the cramped ghetto apartment of Hansberry’s play, for instance—one must conceptualize how much (or how little) space exists within or around it. As environmental literary critic J. Scott Bryson reminds us, the concepts of place and space are “interdependent.” He cites geographer Yi-Fu Tuan’s assertion that, in fact, “‘place’ and ‘space’ are concepts that require each other for definition” (Bryson 9). Of course, space represents more than physical proximity between places; it also designates social proximity or distance. In Erdrich’s *Last Report*, Father Damien’s transformation from woman to man offers him a radically improved form of spatial agency. This transgendered character serves as an apt example of how one’s socially constructed identity influences one’s actual spatial experiences.

## I

Women writers, often out of necessity, have developed a variety of platial and spatial discourses to address the inequalities of human geography. The editors of *Writing Women and Space, Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies* (1994) find that feminists of color, for instance, “while articulating their resistance to racism and imperialism, have developed a range of spaces structured by their particular experiences of exploitation and the specificities of their resistances” (Blunt and Rose 4). The literature I examine similarly articulates a range of what I refer to as *politicized* places and spaces: Hansberry’s drama enacts the

struggles embedded in African American ghettoization. Viramontes' novel depicts the environmental racism encountered by Mexican and Chicano/a migrant workers in California. Rich's poetry speaks out against the patriarchal agenda of U.S. nationalism and its connection to the forced assimilation of American Jews during World War II. Erdrich's text negotiates the impact of colonialism and Catholicism on the sacredness of place within Anishinaabeg culture.

To demonstrate how the work of these women writers represents a collective feminist argument against Western patriarchal notions of place and space, I turn, at times, to the theoretical work of Doreen Massey and Gillian Rose. These British feminist geographers examine how Anglo-European concepts of place and space in the West often stem from male-dominated geographical discourse. In *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (1993), Rose argues that up until the 1990s, there were few, if any, recognized female geographers in this largely male-dominated academic discipline. "Feminist geographers," Rose writes, "have long argued that the domination of the discipline by men has serious consequences both for what counts as legitimate geographical knowledge and who can produce such knowledge" (2). As geographers highly attuned to these gender biases in their own area of study, Massey and Rose critique the patriarchal power structures inherent in the gendering of place and

space through the dissemination of unmarked masculine geographical concepts and knowledge production in Western culture.

When applied to my own work, these feminist geographical arguments contribute to my reading of dominant cultural space in the U.S. as predominantly *masculine* space. Cultural critics bell hooks and Gloria Anzaldúa likewise argue that mainstream U.S. culture has historically privileged geographical terrain as *white* masculine territory, subordinating most white women within its boundaries and marginalizing or erasing women of color outside of it. Feminist criticism by women of color often challenges how mainstream narratives of place and space in the U.S. have historically centered on white, middle-class values that ignore the concerns of poor and working-class people of color, especially women and children, who live on the frontlines of geo-social and environmental warfare. Central to my theoretical discussions and literary readings for each chapter is my interest in demonstrating how geographical *narration* and *knowledge production* in mainstream U.S. discourse shape the lives of women and impact their physical and social environments. Envisioning space as “produced, productive, and producing” allows us to see it as “dependent in part on narrative for its productive effects” (Pat Brady 7).

Historically, dominant narratives in the U.S. have culturally imagined and centered the “American”-ness of the national landscape in homogeneous white racial terms, minimizing or altogether ignoring the

experiences of the under-classes, predominantly people of color, who struggle against socio-spatial and environmental injustice. *Under the Feet of Jesus*, for example, shows how largely unacknowledged systemic environmental racism facilitates U.S. agribusiness's pesticide poisoning of California's grapefields and the Mexican and Chicano/a migrant farmworkers who tend them.<sup>2</sup> This hazardous farming practice, glossed over by corporate food-packaging images that promote an all-American pastoral ideal of U.S. agriculture, are further hidden by U.S. border patrols that disseminate "illegal" immigrant narratives to target and silence already-exploited workers of color. Viramontes' novel asks us to consider how such capitalist media images and U.S. legal rhetoric work together to literally *construct* a false dominant cultural view of the U.S.'s agricultural "environment." Thus when I refer to *environment* here and in the coming chapters, I am using an all-encompassing term to signify multiple meanings, including the social, cultural, ideological, and ecological conditions that shape the lives of humans, and impact non-human nature.

Viramontes' novel provides a searing portrait of the politics of *displacement* and *dislocation* in late-twentieth-century U.S. women's literature. These themes of displacement recur throughout the literature I discuss. Viramontes describes the struggles of Chicano/a migrants moving from camp-to-camp in California, many of whom have come from other places like Texas and Mexico. Hansberry's play alludes to



the Great Migration of rural blacks to the industrialized north and the subsequent “white flight” to the suburbs. Rich’s poetry describes the diasporas unrecorded in the North American landscape, especially but not exclusively that of Jews. Erdrich’s novel refers to the Anishinaabeg’s loss of tribal lands as a result of broken treaties, white land grabs, corporate resource exploitation, and the Indian reservation system. For these women writers, *geography* and/or movement across geographical terrain refers to a range of corporeal space, symbolic cultural territory, and literal material location.

While interdisciplinary in its approach, this dissertation is primarily a literary analysis. My purpose is to analyze how each of these women writers uses *narrative* strategies to debunk existing insider/outsider geographical and environmental discourses, including the narrative of a cohesive “American” national identity—such as Rich’s poetic critique of nationalism as a patriarchal construct in her *Native Land* collection. Furthermore, I emphasize how these women writers draw on non-mainstream perspectives to provide alternatives to taken for granted places and spaces in U.S. culture. “Marginality as position and place of resistance,” writes bell hooks, often provides an outside view of the dominant culture (1990: 150). A range of marginalized or underrepresented locations—African-American concepts of “home” in Hansberry’s play, for example, and the transformative power of nature and place in Anishinaabeg oral tradition in Erdrich’s novel—get equal

attention. Highlighting these unofficial perspectives confirms difference in geographical and environmental interpretation, but also crossroads and intersections. The alternative geographies of these women writers, I argue, challenge commonly held, often oppressive notions of place, space, and identity in the U.S. while simultaneously imagining liberation from spatialized oppression.

In addition to geographers, feminist cultural critics offer compelling spatial imagery to revise, rewrite, or rebel against forms of environmental, cultural, or gender oppression. In *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), Anzaldúa writes about the need to overcome rigid place and space categories, especially those that fix gender and national identity. Her “mestiza consciousness,” as a Chicana living in the borderlands between Mexico and the United States, represents what she calls “a pluralistic mode” of place-consciousness in which she “sustains contradictions” and tolerates “ambiguity” (101). She states, “if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture—una cultura mestiza” (1987: 44). Anzaldúa’s “mestiza consciousness,” which may be read, in part, as the ability to inhabit several locations simultaneously, informs my reading of feminist spatial struggle and liberation in the women’s literature I examine. This multiplicity also informs my definitions of *place* and *space*, terms I use to encompass social, material, and imaginative territory.

*Mestiza consciousness* shares affinities with Soja's concept of *thirdspace*. Both approaches renegotiate the social power structures embedded in dominant cultural spatial discourses. Like Anzaldúa's *mestiza consciousness*, Soja's *thirdspatial approach* disrupts common understandings of space as either "firstspace" materiality or "secondspace" symbolic subjectivity. As Soja argues, and Anzaldúa would agree, by adding a "thirdspace" dimension to our spatial discourses—not an *either/or* but a *both/and*—we may deconstruct spatial binaries and call attention to the spaces of exploitation (1996: 127). In my work, these spatial theories offer ways to dismantle mainstream narratives in the U.S. which attempt to fix place and space within rigid race, class, gender, religious, sexual, and national identity borders. I argue that such unyielding and unjust social divisions of place and space represent traditional Western capitalist paradigms in need of serious revision.

Urban space theorist Henry Lefebvre's idea of a three-dimensional dialectics of space (which influenced Soja's *thirdspatial approach*) also informs my reading of dominant cultural versus marginalized space in Western culture. Lefebvre deduces a complex problematics regarding the Western epistemology of space, particularly the question of how to reconcile spatial practices with spatial symbolism and representation. To put it simply, Lefebvre asserts a three-dimensional dialectics in the social production of space: *spatial practice* (lived reality), *representations*

*of space* (most often those disseminated by knowledge-makers, like urban planners, geographers, scientists, the media, etc.), and *representational spaces* (such as those spatial images and symbols used by artists and writers).<sup>3</sup> If we understand the three-dimensional dialectics of space, maintains Lefebvre, we are better able to articulate how literal and figurative spaces both influence and shape *actual* social relations.

Finally, because my central thesis maintains that mainstream EuroAmerican perceptions of place and space influence unjust sociospatial processes and environmental exploitation in the U.S., I draw from the work of environmental critics and activists, including Lawrence Buell, Winona LaDuke, Vandana Shiva and Karen Warren, who contend that the sustainability of the physical environment on which all life depends urgently requires reworking outmoded and environmentally detrimental concepts of place and space.

## II

My discussion in each chapter reveals how representational places and spaces in U.S. women's literature record various historical gender, race, class, personal identity, and ecological hierarchies. Hansberry's drama, for example, maps *home* for its African American characters not only as personal place-connectedness but also as the manifestation of unequal spatial processes historically rooted in slavery, diaspora, and the Great Migration. Viramontes' novel depicts migration

and homelessness for her Chicano/a characters as traceable to the historical displacement of Indigenous people from *their* native homeland in the area now-known as the American West. Rich's poetry investigates her complicated spatial and identity negotiations as an assimilated Southern Jew living in the predominantly Christian Northeast. Erdrich's novel engages the Catholic Church's involvement in the colonial project of separating Native people from their place-based cultural practices. All of these writers examine how history, culture, and identity in their discursive landscapes connect, as Rich would say, with "the land itself" (1986).

In Chapter One, I demonstrate how *A Raisin in the Sun* critiques African American ghettoization and racial segregation as the products of capitalism, systemic racism, and ongoing internal colonialism. I argue that the play anticipates the contemporary environmental justice movement (which posits racial segregation as a key facilitating factor for environmental racism), and it also reveals how racialized narratives of place and space—the black ghetto versus the white suburbs—naturalize, legitimate, and promote socio-spatial injustice. Set in 1950's Southside Chicago, the play dramatizes the story of the Youngers, a black working-class family struggling to survive in a rat-infested ghetto apartment. I show how the play's action, centered in the ghetto, symbolically engages with a number of other locations, including the rural South of Mama Younger's childhood and the white, middle-class

suburbs where she dreams of owning a home with a garden like she used to see “down home” (*Raisin* 53). While many critics and reviewers view Mama’s suburban dream as assimilating “universal” middle-class values of property ownership, I argue quite the opposite. I contend that Mama’s courage to put down her own “roots” in this privileged white space challenges what Soja would call “the protective fortressing” of the white, middle-classes in suburban enclaves and closed communities (2000: 320). I suggest that by inserting the idea of an *African* American woman’s garden – with its symbolic connections to the family’s agrarian roots as slaves and sharecroppers – into the segregated suburbs, the play disrupts the narrative of the suburbs as the naturalized space of the white middle class.

While Hansberry’s play has attracted few environmental critiques, Viramontes’ *Under the Feet of Jesus* has garnered considerable recognition as part of a growing body of environmental justice literature. In Chapter Two, I build on this existing criticism by linking the novel’s environmental justice themes to its feminist spatial imagery. Chicana feminist literature often contests “the terms of capitalist spatial formation, including attempts to regulate the meanings and uses of spaces, especially the use of space to naturalize violent racial, gender, sexual, and class ideologies” (Brady 6).<sup>4</sup> I show how the novel lifts the veil on fictitious advertising images like the Sunmaid Raisin Girl, which promote a bucolic image of California grape growing, and depicts

instead the dangerous farming conditions encountered by a pregnant Chicana migrant worker and her children. In doing so, I argue, Viramontes' novel exposes mainstream narratives which criminalize or erase these workers' presence in the U.S. agricultural system. The narrative also calls attention to those legal and corporate systems which hide capitalist farming practices in the U.S., like the use of toxic pesticides and an exploitable labor pool. In Viramontes' depiction, the migrant farm laborers' experience within the U.S. proves most difficult for Chicana workers. Their feelings of isolation and invisibility within the dominant U.S. culture become compounded by the strict boundaries of feminine behavior, reinforced by virgin/whore archetypes, within Mexican and Chicano culture. *Under the Feet of Jesus*, however, does not depict its female characters merely as victims. I argue that the novel draws on folkloric, religious, and mythological symbolism from Mexican and Chicano/a culture to envision its characters as incarnations of positive female archetypes. That is, the politics of place, space, nationhood, and cultural identity signify multiple locations of struggle and liberation for the novel's female protagonists.

I turn in Chapter Three to the poetry of Adrienne Rich, an author long-associated with feminism and political writing, but not widely considered an *environmental* writer. I begin by arguing that in her semi-autobiographical poetry collection *Your Native Land, Your Life*, Rich draws on her *politics of location* to expose what Lefebvre would call the

“illusion of transparency” in the concept of homogeneous nationhood. In my analysis—as in other Rich criticism—*Your Native Land* posits a feminist perspective on her Jewish father’s forced assimilation into the dominant white Christian U.S. culture during World War II. However, I also offer a new reading of this collection from an ecofeminist perspective. I show how Rich connects her own family history of enforced assimilation in the U.S. to colonial and capitalist paradigms that promote racism, sexism, *and* environmental exploitation under the guise of nationalism. In her long poem “Sources,” Rich traces the sources of patriarchy and assimilation in *her* native land to the early white settlers’ oppressive treatment of Indigenous people and *their* native land. Here, I argue, the poem articulates its eco-feminist vision.<sup>5</sup> Ecofeminists believe that Western colonial and capitalist paradigms of patriarchal hegemony and resource exploitation continue to dictate current social injustice and ecological destruction on a global scale.<sup>6</sup> Anticipating this current thinking in *Your Native Land*, Rich similarly links the colonial roots of Western imperialism to more contemporary forms of nation-building in the U.S., including dominant-cultural emphasis on assimilation, the patriarchal domestication of women, and the exploitation of Indigenous people’s lands. As this chapter reveals, for the poet to understand her own place in the world, she must confront the nationalized politics of place and space in the country she calls “home” (120).



Like Rich, Erdrich returns to a landscape familiar to her in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* when she places her narrative on the North Dakota soil of her previous Ojibwe reservation novels. Yet recent criticism of *The Last Report*, Erdrich's companion novel to *Tracks*, largely ignores the novel's critique of Western paradigms of place and space. In this final chapter, I argue that through Father Damien/Agnes Dewitt, the female-male Catholic priest who embraces Anishinaabeg spiritual beliefs, Erdrich critiques the *spatial* dimensions of gender in Western culture and the Catholic Church. I also demonstrate how Agnes's embodied spiritual transformations occur in sacred Ojibwe places. These place-based transformations, I contend, signify the influence of Ojibwe cultural traditions in Erdrich's work, including the transformative power of nature in traditional storytelling and "a tribal view of the world" in which "people and place are inseparable" (Erdrich 1985:1). *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* challenges dominant cultural views that the reservation is an entirely colonized space. Instead, Erdrich's fictional reservation represents a range of open spaces, including hybrid religious beliefs, undefined gender categories, and rivers and woods endowed with spiritual power. These spaces both resist and renegotiate the very system of spatial exploitation—the insistence on maps and boundaries, the seizing of native lands, and the

religio-spatial domination of Indigenous people—that created the Native American reservation system in the first place.

Erdrich's *Last Report*, I emphasize in my final chapter, in many ways speaks for as well as with all of the texts I consider in this dissertation. It, along with the drama of Hansberry, the fiction of Viramontes, and the poetry of Rich, exposes how, as Massey argues, space is a process made by social systems of domination and resistance. That concept, rooted in specific narratives of place and space and viewed through various feminist and nonEuroAmerican perspectives, informs all of the chapters in the discussion that follows.

## Chapter One

### In Search of Mama's Garden in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*

I always wanted me a garden like I used  
to see sometimes at the back of the houses  
down home. This plant is as close as I ever  
got to having one.

—Mama Younger, *A Raisin in the Sun*

Lorraine Hansberry once said of the Chicago ghetto where she was born: “Our Southside is a place apart: each piece of our living is a protest” (“To Be Young” 45). Her best-known play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, first produced on Broadway in 1959, dramatically enacts that protest, exposing the racial segregation, unjust social conditions, and substandard housing of Chicago’s Southside. In doing so, the play engages with a number of literal and figurative places: the racist rural South, the segregated urban North, and the white, middle-class suburb which emerged in the second half of the twentieth century as an alternative landscape to this rural/urban divide and to desegregation. Connecting all of these real-and-imagined places is the play’s setting—the ghetto tenement apartment — which represents not only the segregated living conditions of mid-century urban racism but also an ongoing history of socio-spatial injustice for African Americans. I emphasize that central to the play’s critique is Mama Younger’s “little old plant,” a tiny piece of green space within the urban ghetto, and a

symbol of her dream of owning a home in the suburbs with “a little garden in the back” (52, 45).

Contrary to those critics who read *A Raisin in the Sun*—and Mama’s dream—as heralding the postwar suburban American Dream and assimilating white, middle-class values of property ownership, I argue that her dream instead challenges the race and class hegemony implicit in these values. Mama’s decision to transplant her family to the suburbs upsets the mid-century dominant ideal of the suburban landscape as a homogenous (“white”) racial landscape and a pseudo-countrified space unspoiled by urban (“black”) encroachment. Moreover, by inserting the idea of an *African* American woman’s garden – with its symbolic connections to her family’s agrarian roots as black “slaves and sharecroppers” (143) – into this racially homogenous environment, the play disrupts the narrative of the suburbs as the “naturalized setting of the white middle class” (Beuka 190). Consequently, I argue, Mama’s desire to cultivate the idealized green space of the suburbs both emphasizes the spatial injustice of the urban black ghetto and challenges the pastoral façade of the white suburban American Dream.<sup>1</sup>

## I

In her first entrance on stage, Mama “crosses the room, goes to the window, opens it, and brings in [her] feeble little plant growing doggedly in a small pot on the windowsill. She feels the dirt and puts it back out” (38). When Ruth observes, “you sure love that little ol’ thing,”

Mama replies, “I always wanted me a garden like those I used to see at the back of the houses down home. This little old plant is as close as I ever got to having one” (*Raisin* 53). In keeping her little plant alive, Mama keeps alive her dream of owning “a little old two-story somewhere, with a yard” (44). But more importantly, Mama’s relationship to her plant helps her maintain a nostalgic connection, however remote, to the roots of her family’s agrarian past, to those, as she puts it, “five generations of slaves and sharecroppers” from which she comes (143).

A rural southerner living in the urban North, Mama represents the thousands of post-Emancipation southern blacks who migrated to northern cities in the early part of the twentieth century. When she tends to her little plant in the tenement apartment window and yearns for a garden like she used to see “down home,” she experiences what bell hooks would call the “mind/body split” suffered by southern agrarian people forced to live in urbanized environments (hooks 1993: 172). In *Touching the Earth*, hooks argues that this mind/body dichotomy resulted from the extreme culture shock of migration from a deeply rural to a hyper-urban space:

Without the space to grow food, to commune with nature, or to mediate the starkness of poverty with the splendor of nature, black people experienced a profound depression.

Working in conditions where the body was regarded solely

as a tool (as in slavery), a profound estrangement occurred between mind and body. ... Estrangement from nature and engagement in mind/body splits made it all the more possible for black people to internalize white-supremacist assumptions about black identity. Learning contempt for blackness, southerners transplanted in the north suffered both culture shock and soul loss. (172)

In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Mama's estrangement between mind and body manifests as a romanticization of the landscape of the rural South despite the fact that it was a place where, as she tells her son Walter Lee, "we was worried about not being lynched" (74).

Because Mama has been confined to live in an urban "rat trap" (44) for so many years, and to work in conditions where, as hooks would argue, the body is used as a tool, she holds fast to dreams which connect her to the healing forces of nature:

*Mama:* My husband always said being any kind of a servant wasn't a fit thing for a man to have to be. He always said a man's hands was made to make things, *or to turn the earth with*—not to drive nobody's car for 'em—or—(she looks at her own hands) carry they slop jars. (103, *italics mine*)

When Mama feels the dirt and tends to the roots of her plant — with hands that normally carry white people's slop jars — she experiences a

connection to nature, however small, which helps her to offset the drudgery of ghetto life and the brutality of urban manual labor.

Despite the ways in which Mama's dream of a rural/suburban garden represents an outlet for the hardships of urban living, when *A Raisin in the Sun* was first produced, her desire to own a suburban home "with a little garden out back" (44-45) was interpreted by the mainly white theater-going audiences of the late 1950s as an appeal for black racial assimilation into the dominant white culture. The play's predominantly white critics and reviewers paid scant attention to Mama's southern black agrarian roots. As a result, she was frequently misinterpreted as a symbol of all-American "universal" white motherhood.<sup>2</sup> Robert Nemiroff, Hansberry's literary executor and former husband, argues that when *A Raisin in the Sun* first appeared on Broadway in 1959, "white America 'kidnapped' Mama, stole her away and used her fantasized image to avoid what was uniquely *African American* in the play" (9). Ossie Davis (who succeeded Sidney Poitier in the role of Walter), put it thus:

One of the biggest selling points about *Raisin*—filling the grapevine, riding the word-of-mouth, laying the foundation for its wide, wide acceptance—was how much the Younger family was just like any other American family. Some people were ecstatic to find that "it really didn't have to be about Negroes at all!" ... This uncritical assumption,

sentimentally held by the audience, powerfully fixed in the character of the powerful mother with whom everybody could identify, immediately and completely, made any other questions about the Youngers, and what living in the slums of Southside Chicago had done to them, not only irrelevant and impertinent, but also disloyal ... because everybody who walked into the theater saw in Lena Younger ... his own great American Mama. And that was decisive. (*Raisin* 8)

Echoing both Nemiroff's and Davis's observations, literary critic Ben Keppel suggests, "so strong was the desire of mainstream critics to make *Raisin* conform to the surrounding cultural landscape that Hansberry's evocation not only of racism, but of working class life as well, was misunderstood, distorted, or altogether ignored" (Keppel 223). What emerged instead was a generally homogenous and uncritical vision of *A Raisin in the Sun*, and especially of Mama, as heralding the new postwar "universal" suburban American Dream—and extolling the values of white, middle-class motherhood through Mama's apparent emphasis on the virtues of suburban domesticity.<sup>3</sup>

However, as hooks suggests, "the idea of 'home'" and the historical concept of motherhood for African American women differs from traditional dominant cultural ideals of home and maternal domesticity in the U.S. In the early postwar years, in particular, the



American Dream of suburban domesticity reinforced conventional sexist ideals of feminine submission and female confinement within the home space. But hooks argues,

Historically, black women have resisted white supremacist domination by working to establish homeplace. It does not matter that sexism assigned them this role. It is more important that they took this conventional role and expanded it to include caring for one another, for children, for black men, in ways that elevated our spirits that kept us from despair, that taught some of us to be revolutionaries. (1990: 44)

The black matriarch committed to constructing the “homeplace” as a safe space in African American culture represents for hooks a “philosophical core of dedication to community and home” through a “political commitment to racial uplift” (1990: 45). hooks’ concept of home as a site of female power differs radically from the 1950’s white patriarchal ideal of submissive womanhood heavily critiqued by white, middle-class feminists in the 1960s and 1970s. As I show in Chapter Three in reading Adrienne Rich’s poetry, “home” is often cited by white feminists, including Rich, as a location for spatialized gender oppression. But hooks’ reading of “the homeplace” for black women as “site for resistance” seems aligned with Hansberry’s vision of Mama (44) as a female character who asserts her family’s right to own a home in

order to secure themselves a better future. Arguably, Mama makes her move to the suburbs not to assimilate but to fight *against* the racial injustice and segregation of the suburban American Dream.

Although revisionist readings of *Raisin's* politics appeared in the 1980s and '90s—most notably playwright Amiri Baraka's *A Critical Reevaluation* (1989)—a number of critics continued to offer “universalizing” interpretations of the play. In her 1984 biography of Hansberry, for instance, Ann Cheney glowingly reports that “the simple eloquence of the characters” in *A Raisin in the Sun* “elevates the play into a universal presentation of all people's hopes, fears, and dreams” (55). In 1990, Leonard R. N. Ashley glibly characterized the play as “Clifford Odets or Arthur Miller in blackface” (Ashley 151). More recent scholarship—especially Keppel's *The Work of Democracy* (1995), which makes a clear argument for the left-leaning politics of Hansberry's work—has helped to undo these early critical interpretations of *A Raisin in the Sun* as a “confirmation of, rather than a challenge to, the American ethos” (202). Yet the play's *spatial* politics often continue to be oversimplified.

The critical impulse to universalize or ignore the spatial politics of Hansberry's play in dominant cultural terms mimics what Henri Lefebvre would call the “illusion of transparency” in the spatial realm. Lefebvre argues that “within the spatial realm the known and the transparent” are often interpreted as “one and the same thing” so that

space is understood “homogeneously with no relational interpretations of space based on difference” (*Production of Space* 18). In such an interpretation, the experience of a working-class African American family who attempts to penetrate the spatial realm of the white, middle-class suburbs is understood as the same as it would be for a white, working-class family. But if we recognize, as Doreen Massey contends, that there is multiplicity and difference in spatial experiences, then we must “force into the imagination a fuller recognition of the simultaneous coexistence of others with their own trajectories and their own stories to tell” (*For Space* 11). In doing so, those critiques which standardize or universalize the themes of Hansberry’s play become far less useful or accurate.

The critical inclination to transcend the spatial politics of Hansberry’s play extends beyond readings that simplify its commentary on the *suburban* American Dream. Steven Carter, who won an American Book Award for *Hansberry’s Drama, Commitment Amid Complexity* (1991), emphatically declares “how little the spirit of the play depend[s] on its realistic setting (24).” But I argue that the play’s realistic ghetto setting serves as much more than mere backdrop for the spirit of the play. *A Raisin in the Sun* identifies the ghetto apartment as locus for a complex system of historical, ideological, and geographical borders encroaching on the lives of poor and working-class African Americans in postwar urban America. The cramped tenement apartment in which the

play's entire action takes place concretizes the Younger family's lack of economic and social mobility, as the audience, gazing through the imaginary fourth wall of the apartment, becomes complicit in the drama of this oppressive geographical experience.

The play further enacts this geography of oppression in the ways in which the characters react to their "rat trap" living conditions. For example, in the opening scene, Walter is late for work waiting for his turn to use the communal bathroom shared with the other residents on his floor; in scene two, Beneatha "sprays insecticide into the cracks in the walls" (54) becoming embarrassed when her suitor, Asagai, calls to ask if he can visit her at home; and later, young Travis (reminiscent of the opening scene from Richard Wright's *Native Son*), recounts to his mother Ruth how he watched a rat being bashed to death by the Superintendent in front of the family's building. But perhaps James Baldwin's interpretation of the first Broadway performances of *A Raisin in the Sun* underscores most accurately the importance of the play's realistic setting. "Never before," writes Baldwin, "in the entire history of the American theater, had so much of the truth of black people's lives been seen on stage." He explains:

[I]n *Raisin*, black people recognized that house and all the people in it—the mother, the son, the daughter and the daughter-in-law, and supplied the play with an interpretive element which could not be present in the minds of white people: a kind of

claustrophobic terror, created not only by their knowledge of the house but by their knowledge of the streets. (*To Be Young* xviii)

*A Raisin in the Sun*'s realistic depiction of an African American slum house in Southside Chicago effectively underscores how "spaces are not simply the passive backdrop to significant sociohistorical action, rather they are a vital product and determinant of that action" (Beuka 6-7). Hansberry's emphasis on the family's oppressive urban environment reveals that the play is as much concerned with shedding light on the social and physical constraints of the ghetto as with finding ways to escape that environment.

Hence if we read Mama's decision to leave the black urban ghetto for the white middle-class suburbs as a *move toward* postwar racial integration, then we must also recognize how it articulates a symbolic *move against* a history of unjust geographical boundaries and physical displacement for African Americans. As Norma Alarcón writes, "displacement and dislocation are at the core of the invention of the Americas," a process which has created within the U.S. landscape a large portion of privileged space for some and a disproportionate lack of space for many (quoted in Brady 9). In *Extinct Land, Temporal Geographies* (2002), Mary Pat Brady connects this geographical inequality to the early formation of an American identity based on property ownership:

The production of the “Americas” coincided with the solidification of the Cartesian subject as subject of the state, as holder of property, as “cogito ergo sum” and its unspoken corollary, “I conquer.” [A]t the same time, it turned some people into subjects or citizens and other people into slaves, juridically nonexistent. In this sense, the colonization process, an obviously spatial process, has had ongoing ramifications. (Brady 9)

Mama’s legacy includes a long family history of displacement: slaves, unable to own property, but viewed as property; black sharecroppers, laboring in slave-like servitude to wealthy white landowners, and rural southern blacks who migrated to the urban North, where, as hooks reminds us, “racism was just as virulent” and “it was much harder for black people to become homeowners” than it had been in the South (172).

The real-and-imagined spaces of *A Raisin in the Sun*’s narrative — especially the rural/suburban topography of Mama’s dream set against the play’s harsh ghetto setting—place the play within an *African* American socio-spatial context. Specifically the centrality of property to Mama’s subjectivity, as one who wishes to “buy a little place” (44) indicates an important break from the historical narrative of African American dislocation and displacement. Mama attempts to heal this legacy of physical and psychic displacement through her nurturing of

her plant and her dreaming of owning a home with a garden, even as she knows her deceased husband could not escape the debilitating forces of ghetto life: Walter Sr. died because, as Mama says, “he worked himself to death” (45).

Such images of violated corporeal space in the play—Mama’s hands carrying slop jars, Big Walter’s death from overwork—reference the ongoing exploitation of black labor under capitalism.<sup>4</sup> As Brian Jarvis points out, “for a considerable period in African-American history, the body, that most intimate of spaces, was objectified and brutalized as fixed capital” (114). *A Raisin in the Sun* makes clear that this form of brutal labor for capital continued in various ways for post-Emancipation African Americans living in the urban North. The fatal effect of manual labor on Walter Sr.’s body, for example, gets turned into “capital” from his life insurance policy. Ironically Walter Sr.’s death from overwork improves the family’s financial situation but erodes its relationships: the question of *how* the money should be spent becomes the source of bitter disagreement, especially between Mama and Walter Lee.

Observing the toxic effect the money has on the family dynamics, the Nigerian student Asagai asks, “isn’t there something wrong in a house—in a world—where all dreams, good or bad, must depend on the death of a man?” (135). Asagai’s question suggests that the price paid for urban labor—the death of a family member—is the only way the

Youngers can realize their dreams of escaping the urban ghetto. This excruciating paradox emphasizes how, as Marxist urban theorist Andy Merrifield argues, “urban space under capitalism” becomes an acute site of class struggle wherein the accumulation of capital “sucks the blood from living labor to generate surplus value, which becomes the source of profit (and of rent and interest)” (Merrifield 143). In *A Raisin in the Sun*, the ghetto apartment denotes years of perpetual labor for capital—in Ruth’s words, “we’ve put enough rent into this here rat trap apartment to pay for four houses by now” (44). That surplus profit generated for the landlord stands in direct inverse ratio to the money the family has for a house of their own: a space they financially control.

The play’s representation of the critical collision of corporeal space and capital in the Younger family’s world is most intimate in the controversy surrounding Ruth’s pregnancy. Because the family has neither money nor space enough for a new baby (as Beneatha bluntly demands, “where is he going to live, on the *roof*? 58), Ruth considers having an abortion. She believes she must “destroy” her baby, as Mama puts it, rather than have the child born into poverty (75). Ruth’s predicament underscores the family’s current financial struggles—and makes Mama’s decision to buy a house in the suburbs even more relevant. Yet Ruth’s situation also alludes to a complex history of socioeconomic oppression and a lack of reproductive choices for poor and working-class women of color. “Since the earliest days of slavery,”



writes Angela Davis in *Women, Race and Class* (1983), black female slaves “self-imposed abortions” or committed “reluctant acts of infanticide” out of desperation that their children not have to endure the conditions of slavery (204). Davis points out that post-slavery, prior to the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* ruling legalizing abortions, the largest number of women who resorted to illegal and dangerous back-room abortions—like Ruth would likely endure—were Black and Latina women. Davis suggests that the “stories they tell are not so much about their desire to be free of their pregnancy, but rather about the miserable social conditions which dissuade them from bringing new lives into the world” (204).

While Beneatha is often credited as the character who most expresses Hansberry’s commitment to women’s rights in the play, Ruth’s decision to keep her child anticipates the growing seeds of what Davis calls “a posture of suspicion” by women of color toward the “abortion rights activities of the early 1970s” (215). While Davis believes that birth control, including “abortions when necessary—is a fundamental prerequisite for the emancipation of women” (203), she also points out that prior to the Women’s Liberation Movement, “it was assumed within birth control circles that poor women, Black and immigrant alike, had a moral obligation to restrict the size of their families” (210). Ruth’s final decision to keep the baby may not, therefore, represent an anti-abortion stance in the play as much it

challenges historically racist-and-classist assumptions about the reproductive and maternal rights of working-class women of color.<sup>5</sup> Ruth's decision reclaims control over the intimate space of the body in a world in which corporeal violation of the poor and working classes is the norm.

Ruth's decision to keep her baby, however, will not change the socioeconomic conditions into which her child will be born.<sup>6</sup> Therefore upon making her decision, Ruth's desire to escape the urban ghetto reaches an almost hysterical pitch. She tells Mama, "I'll work twenty hours a day in all the kitchens in Chicago... I'll strap my baby on my back if I have to and scrub all the floors in America and wash all the sheets in America if I have to—but we got to move! We got to get OUT OF HERE!!" (140). If Ruth's impassioned speech calls to mind the image of black female slaves who were forced to "strap" their babies on their backs while working long hours in the agricultural fields of the South, it also profoundly articulates the crushing cycle of exploited labor for capital which so demoralized black workers living in the postwar urban North.

In order to break this cycle of labor for the capitalist gain of others, Ruth's husband Walter Lee believes their future depends upon a profitable business venture like the "white boys" do. The following scene highlights Walter's feverish capitalist aspirations, which eventually lead to his downfall:

WALTER: Sometimes I see the future stretched out in front of me—just plain as day. The future, Mama. Hanging over there at the edge of my days. Just waiting for me—a big, looming blank space—full of *nothing*. Just waiting for *me*. But it don't have to be. Mama—sometimes when I'm downtown and I pass them cool, quiet-looking restaurants where them white boys are sitting back and talking 'bout things ... sitting there turning deals worth millions of dollars ... sometimes I see guys don't look much older than me—

MAMA. Son—how come you talk so much 'bout money?

WALTER. Because it is life, Mama!

MAMA. Oh. So now it's life. Money is life. Once upon a time freedom used to be life—now it's money. I guess the world really do change.

WALTER. No—it was always about money, Mama. We just didn't know about it.

MAMA. No...Something has changed. You something new, boy. In my time we was worried about not being lynched and getting to the North if we could and how to stay alive and still have a pinch of dignity too. Now here come you and Beneatha—talking 'bout things we ain't never even thought about hardly, me and daddy. You ain't satisfied or proud of nothing we done. I mean that you had a home; that we kept you out of trouble till you was grown; that you don't ride to work on the back of nobody's streetcar—You my children—but how different we done become. (*Raisin* 73-74)

In this scene, the restrictive spatial nature of Walter's vision for himself suggests that the only way out of the oppressively blank space of his future is through the financial freedom to fill that space with material possessions. Mama and Walter's different positions in this scene symbolize a clash of personal and material values. They also signify the liminal spatial locations of two generations of twentieth-century African

Americans: one who has struggled to achieve “freedom” by migrating to the urban north, and the other who, despite his parents’ escape from the poverty and violence of the rural south, finds no future in the urban ghetto because it is no less racist or segregated than the rural space left behind.

Although Walter and Mama’s dreams for a better future differ in content, the form of their longings take shape as variously imagined ideal spaces. As the play reveals, the longed-for spaces imagined by Walter Lee and Mama—a profitable business and a safe suburban home—remain deferred dreams for postwar working-class African Americans. Walter is cheated out of his portion of the inheritance and Mama must face the violent racism of the suburbs in order to get her dream home.

## II

### Disrupting the Suburban Pastoral

Given the racial homogeneity of the suburban social landscape, its *natural* landscape – as a seemingly fixed place unspoiled by urban encroachment – nevertheless represents a potently romantic rural ideal for Mama. Her dream of an idyllic suburban garden reflects a larger pastoral vision of the ecology of the suburbs prevalent in twentieth-century American culture. Environmental literary critic Lawrence Buell points out that “the cultural construction of suburbia in the United States ... has drawn heavily upon pastoral imagery and values:

envisioning communities of safe, clean, ample residential spaces (including green oases of lawn around single-family homes)” (2001: 37). Mama’s idealization of a safe suburban garden as a replacement for a bygone pastoral southern landscape, in part, expresses what Buell might call a “desire to affirm place against place-eroding historical forces” (58). Buell finds that “the romantic idealization of country village life [began] in cities” (58). He notes that “in the history of U.S. literature,” some of the “strongest pulsations of regional feeling have been related to consolidations of some sort,” including the period after the great African-American northern migration and in “the latter twentieth century, now that large extended suburbanized metropolitan areas, more or less resistant to regional difference, have become the nation’s commonest residential choice” (58). Mama’s vision of a pastoral suburban home with a garden embodies a romanticized green space prevalent in the postwar ideal of the suburban landscape.

In *Suburbia Nation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film* (2004), Robert Beuka traces how the topography of postwar American suburbs was initially constructed:

While the beginning of the twentieth century saw increasing urbanization across the land, the second half of the century witnessed the massive development of the suburban landscape, a new type of terrain that dissolved the

urban/rural place distinctions that had, until that point, largely characterized American topography. (1)

The suburbs, like the urban spaces against which they were positioned, emerged as both a physical and an ideological location. After World War II, the suburban landscape became a place which held “an idealized image of middle-class life and specific cultural anxieties about the very elements of society that were presumed to threaten this image” (7). Chief among these threatening elements of course were those which destabilized the white hegemonic order. Historian Samuel Kaplan points out that “racial homogeneity was, from the outset, a crucial component of the ‘dream vision’ of suburbia sold to white Americans.” He writes:

[T]he prevailing myth in suburbia is the Protestant Ethic, which, simply defined, is that an individual through hard work shall reap his reward—and that reward according to the ethic and embellished by advertising and the media is ownership of a single, detached house on a plot of landscaped ground in an economically, socially, racially homogeneous community free of the turmoil of the evil city. (qtd. in Beuka 190)

In *A Raisin in the Sun* this myth is vividly expressed in the character of Mr. Lindner, Chairman of the Clybourne Park Improvement Association.

As mouthpiece for the hegemonic mind-set of his community, Lindner represents the racist-and-classist attitudes integral to the early

ideological formation of the American suburbs. He tries to persuade the Younger family not to move into his all-white suburban neighborhood where Mama has made a down payment on a house:

Well—you see our community is made up of people who've worked hard as the dickens for years to build up that little community. They're not rich and fancy people; just hard-working honest people who don't really have much but those little homes and a dream of the kind of community they want to raise their children in. Now, I don't say we are perfect and there is a lot wrong in some of the things they want. But you've got to admit that a man, right or wrong, has the right to want to have the neighborhood he lives in a certain kind of way. And at the moment the overwhelming majority of our people out there feel that people get along better, take more of a common interest in the life of the community, when they share a common background. I want you to believe me when I tell you that race prejudice simply doesn't enter into it. It is a matter of the people of Clybourne Park believing, rightly or wrongly, as I say, that for the happiness of all concerned that our Negro families are happier when they live in their own communities.

(Raisin 118)

Lindner's community personifies both the middle-class Protestant work ethic ("people who've worked hard as the dickens for years") and the racist desire ("a common interest") for white racial homogeneity that dominated the mid-century suburban mindset. His speech in this pivotal scene exposes what Edward Soja calls "the protective fortressing of white, suburban, middle-class, male, straight, and law-abiding citizens," and how such fortressing essentially "encourage[s] the internment of black minorities" into ghetto communities (*Postmetropolis* 320). Linder, the only white character in Hansberry's play, clearly articulates the privileged assumptions of white suburban racial hegemony.

In its characterization of the imagined offstage world of the Clybourne Park suburb as a bastion of white racism, *A Raisin in the Sun* throws into bold relief the near impossibility of social mobility for mid-century urban African Americans and disrupts the pastoral image of the suburbs as a bucolic space free from the elements of the inner city. By the play's end, the family's decision to follow Mama's lead, as Nemiroff argues, "to defy house-pattern taboos, threats, bombs, and God knows what else" (10), dramatizes the real struggles faced by a black family who wants, in the words of Mrs. Johnson, "to keep on pushing out" of the ghetto (100).<sup>7</sup> By showing us the blatant postwar suburban racism of Linder's Clybourne Park Improvement Association, and its potential underbelly of violence, Hansberry's play anticipates the



spatial injustice inherent in the explosion of homeowners' associations (HOAs), common interest developments (CIDs), and gated communities prevalent in American cities and suburbs in the latter part of the twentieth century.

Soja critiques these residential organizations, maintaining that they are made up of homeowners "with 'clout' enough to partition themselves off fearfully from the real-and-imagined spaces of the criminalized poor" (313). Regarding the spatial politics of such private neighborhood policing, Soja agrees with Mike Davis's argument in *City of Quartz* (1990) that the "homeowners' movement has been 'a protest against the urbanization of suburbia'" and has "as its primary aim 'the reassertion of social privilege'" (209). Soja also points out that "all of these forms of privatized community are implicated in the deep erosion of public space" and the entrenching of privileged social places in the American landscape (210); though this topography of privilege is not merely the work of private citizens. Postwar racially homogeneous suburbs like Clybourne Park also developed as a result of systemic state-sponsored racism. In the postwar era, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) had developed business practices that promoted the racial segregation characteristic of the postwar suburbs. Beuka contends that the FHA tended to exhibit "an antiurban bias" and to "back mortgages for homes in new, all-white suburbs, while offering less attractive terms or no backing at all for inner-city housing" (191).

Such government-sanctioned racism also became the norm for real estate agencies which promoted racial homogeneity in the suburbs by restricting “sales of suburban homes to white, middle-class families” (191). Government programs set up to aid the mass movement to the suburbs were complicit in promoting the homogeneous racial profile of this new suburban landscape (188).<sup>8</sup>

Hansberry was no stranger to the politics of Chicago’s housing discrimination. In 1939, Hansberry’s father brought a case before the Supreme Court (*Hansberry v. Lee*) to challenge the constitutionality of restrictive racial covenants in Chicago. In the Depression era, restrictive racial covenants governed nearly 80 percent of Chicago’s neighborhoods, and ensured that African Americans were confined to the “Black Belt,” which studies at the time proved “were the most rundown areas of the city” (*Black Metropolis* 113). It was not until 1964 that Congress passed the Fair Housing Act. Yet even while institutionalized racial covenants (in which black families were not allowed to own homes in white neighborhoods) were formally challenged by the U.S. Supreme Court’s *Shelley v. Kraemer* ruling in 1948, suburban racial segregation continued to thrive well into the 1950s and 1960s, and in some cases, into the late twentieth century. As recently as 1998, HUD Secretary Andrew Cuomo had announced the largest settlement ever in an unfair housing dispute in which “Accubanc Mortgage Corporation of Dallas, Texas, agreed to a pay \$2.148 billion in

a settlement with the Department of Housing and Urban Development for discrimination in loan practices” (“Mortgage”). According to David Naguib Pellow’s research in *The Garbage Wars: The Fight For Environmental Justice in Chicago* (2002), “African American housing applicants at every socioeconomic level” at the turn-into-the-twenty-first century continue to be “denied mortgage loans while white applicants with identical qualifications are accepted” (Pellow 178). Hansberry’s play anticipates these ongoing spatial struggles for African Americans.

A challenge to the racist ideology which naturalized the Chicago ghettos as “black” and the middle-class suburbs as “white,” Mama’s decision to transplant her plant and her family into the white, suburban pastoral space disrupts the racial order imposed by the dominant culture. Her decision to put a down payment on a home in a segregated neighborhood creates a countercartography – a spatial narrative which revises one that has “gained a normative or taken-for-granted status” (Brady 6). In this case, the narrative dictates, as Walter puts it, that “there ain’t no colored people living in Clybourne Park” or any other white suburbs of Chicago (93). Aware of the racial politics of Chicago housing, Mama offers some insight into why she chose a house in a white neighborhood: “Son—I just tried to find the nicest place for the least amount of money for my family. ... Them houses they put up for colored people in them areas way out all seem to cost twice as much as other houses. I did the best I could” (93). When Walter bitterly

retorts, “So that’s the peace and comfort you went out and bought for us today,” it is clear that the family’s move to the suburbs does not represent the African American dream fulfilled.

But rather than view the family’s final decision to move to the suburbs pessimistically, we might consider how it reflects—as hooks once noted of Hansberry’s body of work—a “deeply optimistic” quality “rooted in activism” (1991: 218). This activism is evident in Mama’s leading the charge to chart new terrain, cross spatial boundaries at a time when it was not acceptable, and to challenge racial injustice. Hansberry herself said of Mama: she may be “[s]eemingly clinging to traditional restraints,” but “it is she who drives the young into firehoses. And one day she simply refuses to move to the back of the bus in Montgomery” (Keppel 210). The playwright’s image of Mama’s character is that of a quietly determined civil rights activist willing to break the codes of segregation and challenge the mainstream values of her day. In his *Critical Reevaluation* of the play, Baraka writes,

[T]he concerns I once dismissed as ‘middle class’—buying a house and moving into ‘white folks’ neighborhoods’—are actually reflective of the essence of black people’s striving and the will to defeat segregation, discrimination, and national oppression. There is no such thing as a ‘white folks’ neighborhood’ except to racists and to those submitting to racism. (20)

Baraka's reconsideration of *A Raisin in the Sun* asks readers to reflect upon *how* they might perceive the real-and-imagined spaces of Hansberry's play and, like Mama, challenges dominant cultural perceptions that neighborhoods are naturally race-and-class coded.

### III

#### Home to Africa

ASAGAI. I have a bit of a suggestion.

BENEATHA. What?

ASAGAI. That when it is all over—that you come home with me.

BENEATHA. Oh, Asagai, at this moment you decide to be romantic!

ASAGAI. My dear, young creature of the New World. I do not mean across the city—I mean across the ocean: home—to Africa.

—*A Raisin in the Sun*, Act III, Scene 1

Representing how contemporary systemic racism in the United States originates from historic colonial and imperial influences would become a key theme in Hansberry's later writing.<sup>9</sup> In the early 1960s, Hansberry began to produce works that expanded on the African themes of *Raisin*:

Among these efforts was an opera on Toussaint L'Ouverture and the liberation of Haiti; *Les Blancs*, a representation of the conflict between colonialism and nationalism in Africa; and *The Drinking Gourd*, a teleplay that sought both to return slavery to the front of centennial reflections on the Civil War and to reassert the notion that it was American capitalism that made that conflict inevitable. Of these

projects, only *The Drinking Gourd* (1960) was finished at the time of her death. (Keppel 215)

Through *Raisin's* Asagai—with his revolutionary vision of a new Africa free from colonial rule and his probable marriage to Beneatha whom he calls a “creature of the new world”—Hansberry appeals to postwar urban blacks to seek out a marriage of the past with the present. That is, in order for a new generation of African Americans to fight a revolution in the new world against the present social organization that keeps them “ghetto-locked,” as Hansberry put it, they must first understand the colonial history which brought them there.<sup>10</sup>

As the family prepares to move to its new suburban home, Beneatha contemplates returning “home—to Africa” with Asagai (136). In an effort to convince her of a promising future outside of the United States, Asagai describes their journey in historical and spatial terms: “Three hundred years later the African Prince rose up out of the seas and swept the maiden back across the middle passage over which her ancestors had come” (137). He goes on to describe Nigeria with gorgeous natural imagery: “I will show you our mountains and our stars; and give you cool drinks from gourds and teach you the old songs and the ways of our people—and, in time, we will pretend that—you have only been away for a day” (137). Nigerian critic Philip Uko Effiong, who writes on the African themes in Hansberry’s work, contends that *A Raisin in the Sun* uses the character of Asagai “to fortify and scrutinize the familial,

political, and cultural bond between Africa and black America” (273). Hansberry, who took a deep interest in reflecting on contemporary as well as ancestral links between black Americans and Africans, claimed in a 1959 interview that Asagai “makes the statement of the play.”<sup>11</sup>

This statement suggests, in part, that racial justice for African Americans living in early postwar racist America may be found in revolutionary movements in Africa. When *Raisin* was produced in 1959, African struggles for independence had begun to receive international attention; by the 1960s, African nationalist movements were widespread. “*Raisin* is the first major play by an African American,” writes Effiong, “to translate into dramatic form the European exploitation of the lands and peoples of Africa, and the ensuing rebellion against European rule” (273). Just as Asagai’s Nigeria represents a place of beauty and of extreme racial oppression so, too, is Mama’s ideal suburban landscape tainted by racism. Thus Hansberry’s play asks us to read Mama’s radical decision to move to a white neighborhood (despite its racism) as parallel to Asagai’s revolutionary position toward Africa (he claims he would rather die at the hands of his “own black countrymen” than of “British soldiers” 136). Both Mama and Asagai rebel against, rather than accept, racial injustice at “home.”

However much Mama and Asagai share a symbolic struggle against racism in the play, they also appear as cultural opposites. Asagai’s sophisticated worldview serves as a foil to Mama’s limited

knowledge of black history. For example, despite being a descendant of slaves, Mama admits to Beneatha that she knows almost nothing about African people, history, or geography:

MAMA. What's his name?

BENEATHA. Asagai, Joseph. Ah-sah-guy...He's from Nigeria.

MAMA. Oh, that's the little country that was founded by slaves way back...

BENEATHA. No, Mama—that's Liberia.

MAMA. I don't think I never met no African before.

BENEATHA. Well, do me a favor and don't ask him a whole lot of ignorant questions about Africans and all that.

MAMA. Well, now, I guess if you think we so ignorant 'round here maybe you shouldn't bring your friends here—

BENEATHA. It's just that people ask such crazy things. All anyone seems to know about when it comes to Africa is Tarzan.

MAMA. Why should I know anything about Africa?

*(Raisin 57)*

Mama's question, "why should I know anything about Africa?" articulates how contemporary urban blacks often feel geographically displaced and culturally disconnected from their ancestral past.

Indeed, the Youngers (a surname that reinforces the family as a new generation of African Americans) are all depicted as disconnected from their African roots, with some of the play's most comical scenes



stemming from Beneatha and Walter mimicking African customs. Hansberry, in fact, viewed her play's main characters as unable to grasp in full the complex historic or systemic conditions that brought them to their current ghetto conditions. She emphasizes in her instructions to the director of the 1960 film version of *Raisin*,

This is the ghetto of Chicago . . . Not indolence, not indifference, and certainly not lack of ambition imprisons [the Younger family], but various enormous questions of the social organization around them which they understand in part, but only in part. (Nemiroff 5)

Hansberry's text emphasizes the ghetto of Chicago as a shaping force, historically influenced, socially constructed, culturally mediated, and subjectively experienced in the lives of its characters.

In representing the conditions of postwar United States' racial segregation and African American ghettoization, the play not only alludes to an ongoing history of racial injustice, but also anticipates a future concern of the contemporary environmental justice movement: racial segregation is one of the key facilitating factors of environmental racism. As Robert Bullard argues, "the United States is a racially divided nation where extreme inequalities continue to persist" and those inequalities are based on the ways in which "racial segregation continues to be the dominant residential pattern," whereby "people of color are clustered into urban ghettos, barrios, reservations, and rural

‘poverty pockets’” as a result of the systemized “pattern” of racist “boundaries and restrictions set by the dominant white society” (7).

Deborah Robinson likewise points out that at the turn-into-the-twenty-first century,

[T]hree out of five African Americans live in communities with uncontrolled toxic waste sites. ... [and] three of the five largest commercial hazardous waste landfills are located in predominantly African American and Latino communities. As a consequence, the residents of these communities suffer shorter life spans, higher infant and adult mortality, poor health, poverty, diminished economic opportunities, substandard housing, and an overall degraded quality of life (1).

Had Hansberry lived into the latter twentieth century, she perhaps would not have been surprised to learn that 1980s Chicago “was more racially segregated than apartheid-era South Africa” (Pellow 178). The play’s critique of ghettoization and racial segregation—the products of capitalism, systemic racism, and ongoing internal colonialism—articulates some of the key social justice concerns that led to the African Independence Movement and to the U.S. Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, and its critique continues to be relevant to today’s global Environmental Justice movement.

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In the final moments of *A Raisin in the Sun*, Mama, standing alone on stage, the apartment empty, and the rest of the family waiting downstairs with the moving van is described in the following stage directions:

*Mama stands, at last alone in the living room, her plant on the table before her as the lights start to come down. She looks around at all the walls and ceilings and suddenly, despite herself, while the children call below, a great heaving thing rises in her and she puts her fist to her mouth to stifle it, takes a final desperate look, pulls her coat about her, pats her hat, and goes out. The lights dim down. The door opens and she comes back in, grabs her plant, and goes out for the last time. (151)*

Mama, leaving the ghetto apartment at last, brings with her a piece of it and its antecedents in the form of her little plant. This “dogged little plant”—to be transplanted into her long-awaited garden—serves as a reminder of her rural past and a symbol of her long urban struggle. In this final image, Mama—a maternal figure who draws strength from nature—becomes part of a tradition of strong, agrarian female figures in twentieth-century women’s literature. She follows Janie, the powerful female protagonist of Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) who is linked to

images of fecund nature and ultimately sees her life as "a great tree in leaf" (20); she anticipates Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988)—which has at its center the elderly matriarch and expert gardener, Miranda "Mama" Day—and Alice Walker's influential womanist essay collection, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (1984) in which the author describes her own mother's powerful connection to nature: "My mother adorned with flowers whatever shabby house we were forced to live in ... . Before she left home for the fields, she watered her flowers, chopped up the grass, and laid out new beds" (Walker 683). Walker credits her mother's artistry with flowers as the reason her "memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blooms" (Walker 683). Like Hansberry's Mama, who says of her plant, "it expresses ME!" (121), Walker's mother uses gardening as a form of creativity. This ability to hold on, despite being "hindered and intruded upon in so many ways" is a trait that Walker sees in many working-class black women (121). Mama takes her place amongst these women, each determined to carve out a space of her own.

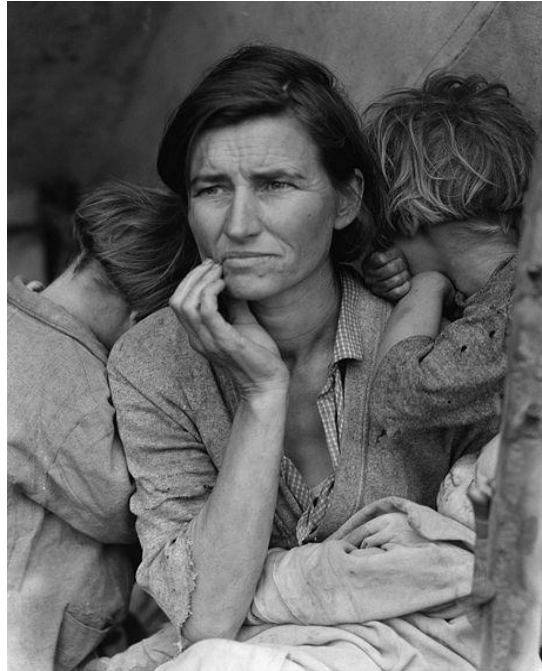
## Chapter Two

### Physical Borders and Cultural Boundaries in *Under the Feet of Jesus*

If going home is denied me then I will  
have to stand and claim my space, making  
a new culture—*una cultura mestiza*—with  
my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar  
and my own feminist architecture.

– Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*

In this chapter, I consider another agrarian female figure in twentieth-century American literature and culture: the migrant farm worker. While on the one hand, this figure emerges in the 1930s as a sentimental icon of the displaced American farm mother (John Steinbeck's Ma Joad springs to mind), on the other hand, contemporary narratives of the migrant farm worker advance a more pernicious stereotype (consider the terms "illegal alien" and "wetback" for Mexican migrant workers in the United States). Of the popular sentimental figure, "Migrant Mother," Dorothea Lange's 1936 photograph, embodies the most famous visual representation of the migrant farm mother in the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Taken as part of a Farm Security Administration (FSA) project to document the lives of migratory California farm laborers during the Depression, the photograph struck a chord with the American public: a starving-yet-stoical mother, babe-in-arms, two ragged children clinging to her sides, sits in a squalid camp in California. The 1936 *San Francisco News* headline screams, "What Does the 'New Deal' Mean to This Mother and Her Children?"



**Figure 1: Dorothea Lange. *Migrant Mother*. c. 1936. Photograph from Curtis, James. *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth: FSA Photography Reconsidered*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989.**

The caption reads,

Here, in the fine, strong face of the mother, photographed at the camp of starving pea-pickers in San Luis Obispo County, is the tragedy of lives lived in squalor and fear, on terms that mock the American dream of security and independence and opportunity which every child has been taught to believe. (*San Francisco News*)

With its publication, “Migrant Mother” instantly became the face of the Depression, a powerful symbol of the failure of the American dream for the “Okie Dustbowl” migrant farmer in California whose ruin was attributed to the land itself. In *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of*

*American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (1999), Michael Denning argues, “California had long seemed a promised land to the nation, and the betrayal of that promise gave the ‘Grapes of Wrath’ story much of its dramatic power ... [T]he migration as exodus came to be one of the grand narratives, the tall tales, of the mid-century United States” (264).<sup>2</sup> Yet this persuasive narrative powerfully represented by Lange’s “Migrant Mother”—and by Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) a few years later—only defined the plight of the drought-plagued Anglo-American farmer. The considerable ethnic and racial diversity of migrant laborers working in the United States remained conspicuously absent from this Dustbowl saga.

In “Photographic License,” reporter Geoffrey Dunn points out that the FSA archive of photos, of which “Migrant Mother” is the most famous, narrowly depicts the ethnic and racial profile of the Depression-era migrant farm laborer in California:

Like Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*, the FSA photos give the impression that the work in California’s fields was being done almost exclusively by Dust Bowl migrants of European descent. ... [T]hroughout the decade, there were substantial numbers of Mexicans, Filipinos, Japanese, and African Americans working in the fields of California. Only a small percentage of FSA file—there are but a couple of

portraits of Filipinos, for instance, among the 270,000 FSA photographs—capture this ethnic diversity. (24)

Ironically, Florence Owens Thompson, the woman in the “Migrant Mother” photograph, was a full-blood Cherokee woman, whose ancestors had been displaced from their tribal lands long before the Depression began.<sup>3</sup> But Lange did not investigate Thompson’s roots. Years later, the photographer admitted in an interview, “I did not ask her name or her history.”<sup>4</sup> In “Photographic License,” Dunn notes the apparent contradiction of the mythic image and the lived reality of the woman in the photo:

Whatever the woman, Florence Owens Thompson, thought of Lange's actions at the time, she came to regret that Lange ever made the photographs, which she felt permanently colored her with a “Grapes of Wrath” stereotype. Thompson, a Native American from Oklahoma, had already lived in California for a decade when Lange photographed her. The immediate popularity of the images in the press did nothing to alleviate the financial distress that had spurred the family to seek seasonal agricultural work. (22)

Dunn notes that contrary to the despairing immobility the famous image seems to embody, however, Thompson was an active participant in farm labor struggles in the 1930s, occasionally serving as an



organizer. Her daughter later commented, ‘She was a very strong woman. She was a leader. I think that's one of the reasons she resented the photo—because it didn't show her in that light’” (22). The story behind Lange’s photograph offers a powerful example of how stereotypes about women’s agency are often perpetuated by influential cultural narratives disseminated through the U.S. media.

In fact, the 1930’s press took full advantage of Thompson’s anonymity, using her image to promote a dominant narrative of the failure of the American dream for the Anglo-American farmer, much as 1950’s reviewers would later overlook Mama’s southern black agrarian roots in *A Raisin in the Sun* to justify the narrative of the promise of the white suburban American dream. The Dustbowl narrative proved especially effective in removing from view the thousands of early-twentieth century Mexican migrant farm laborers working in California. In fact, during the Depression, the U.S. government systematically relocated this population of workers, and from “1929 to 1935, 80,000 people of Mexican descent, regardless of their legal right to be in the United States, were deported to Mexico” (Shea 124). The labor shortage of World War II brought about the bracero program allowing millions of Mexican workers back into the U.S., but the subsequent “large-scale expulsions of Mexican immigrants” during the 1950s sent workers back again across the border (124). By the late-twentieth century, Mexican “guest workers” on farms in the United States under the H-2A visa

program were classified as “non citizens” and “non immigrants,” making it extremely difficult for these workers to have any legal rights at all (125).

Today, given the careful policing of their bodies and the historical erasure of their rightful presence within the American landscape, migrant workers of Mexican descent—guest workers and American citizens—repeatedly express in documented testimony their ongoing struggles with “the border patrol, the police, and the law” (Shea 133). These official enforcements, Anne Shea argues, get bolstered by narratives “produced by the media, the growers, and the state” which further alienate legal workers “who must struggle to contest” stereotypical representations of themselves as illegal aliens or criminals “within a public sphere that carefully controls narrative production” (133). The representation of female farm workers, in particular, remains vigilantly controlled by male-dominated corporate, legal, and media forces. Edward Soja points out that a 1997 demographic study of ethnic diversity within the labor market of the greater Los Angeles area found that while 88.5 percent of lawyers and 83.5 percent of workers in marketing and advertising were white men, 78.4 percent of farm workers were Mexican women (2000: 287). These female farm laborers traditionally have been the least visible members of the U.S. workforce—and, as Gloria Anzaldúa argues, often the most vulnerable.<sup>5</sup>

Dominant cultural narratives which label Mexican and Chicana/o migrant farm workers as “illegal” or erase their physical presence within the U.S. agricultural production system ultimately serve the interests of corporate agribusiness. Mainstream narratives overlook or seriously downplay the system of exploitative farming practices, including the use of toxic pesticides and a cheap labor pool with few legal rights, and placate the majority of consumers who remain either unaware of, or unsympathetic to, the victims of such practices. Even with organizations such as the United Farm Workers which advocates for workers’ rights, “part of the Growers’ Association orientation for new workers includes strong warnings against filing complaints” and reminders that if they seek out “legal assistance,” these workers will be “sent back to Mexico” (Shea 126). Such threats prove very effective given the fact that documented workplace abuses run rampant in the agribusiness industry, yet “no H-2 worker has ever registered a complaint with government regulators” (127).<sup>6</sup> The ongoing violation of Mexican and Chicana/o migrant farm workers’ bodies, legal rights, and social visibility by corporate, legal, and narrative methods systematically benefits a capitalist ruling class.

This systemic erasure of the Mexican and Chicana/o migrant farm laborers’ experience within the U.S. proves most difficult for women workers. Their feelings of isolation and invisibility within the dominant U.S. culture often become compounded by the rigid boundaries of

feminine behavior, reinforced by virgin/whore archetypes, within Mexican and Chicano culture. Naomi Quiñonez argues that Chicanas, in particular, have been “largely negated, devalued, or omitted from two types of discourse: the larger American discourse and the male Chicano discourse” (141). As a result, Chicana feminist writers have “deployed an acute spatial analysis” in their work not only to map such oppressive cultural boundaries for women, but also “to analyze, critique, and attempt to undermine them” (Brady 10-11). In this chapter, I read Helena María Viramontes’ *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1996) as one such analysis and critique, interpreting the novel as a counter-narrative to dominant cultural representations and discursive omissions of the Chicana migrant farm worker in the U.S. and as a feminist revision of patriarchal female archetypes within Mexican and Chicano culture.

As is now well-known, in *Borderlands/La Frontera* Anzaldúa expresses a *mestiza consciousness* which embraces multiple locations of race, culture, and sexuality in order to challenge culturally determined roles for those living a Borderlands existence, especially Chicanas in the U.S. Southwest/Mexico border areas:

The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a

plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—  
 nothing is thrust out, the good, the bad, the ugly, nothing  
 rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain  
 contradictions, she turns it into something else. (101)

No matter how complex the play of identities that Anzaldúa represents, “whiteness” as the privileged racial identity in the United States remains firmly entrenched. However, as a marginalized space capable of producing cultural plurality—and as a site for political protest—Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands* shares important affinities with Soja’s *Thirdspace*. Soja contends that “Thirdspace,” like “Lefebvre’s most encompassing notion of social space,” represents spatial awareness from a socio-political viewpoint that is “designed to break down and disorder rigid dichotomy,” even if it cannot completely eradicate its social power:

It is political choice, the impetus of an explicitly political project, that gives special attention and particular contemporary relevance to the spaces of representation, to *lived space as a strategic location* from which to encompass, understand, and potentially transform all spaces simultaneously. Lived social space, more than any other, is Lefebvre’s limitless Aleph, the space of all inclusive simultaneities, perils as well as possibilities: the space of

radical openness, the space of social struggle. (1996: 62, 67)

Both *Borderlands* and *Thirdspace* envision “the real and the imagined intertwined” and each acknowledges how, as Soja puts it, “the social relations of production, reproduction, exploitation, domination, and subjection” created by “capitalism, racism, patriarchy, and other material spatial practices” produce “spaces for struggle, liberation, and emancipation” (68). Like Anzaldúa’s *mestiza* consciousness, Soja’s *thirdspatial* approach disrupts our understanding of space as *either* “firstspace” materiality *or* “secondspace” symbolic subjectivity, adding a “thirdspace” dimension to spatial discourse designed, in part, to deconstruct this *either/or* spatial binary and call attention to the spaces of exploitation (1996: 127).

Focusing on *Under the Feet of Jesus*’ representations of place and space as pluralistic sites of struggle and liberation for its female protagonists, I argue that Viramontes’ novel expresses both a *Thirdspatial* approach and a *Borderlands*’ *mestiza* consciousness.<sup>7</sup> The novel’s compassionate portrayal of Petra and her daughter, Estrella, as U.S. citizen migrant workers exposed to toxic pesticides revises stereotypes of the “illegal” farm worker narrative within popular U.S. culture while simultaneously exposing exploitative agricultural labor practices in the California agribusiness industry, and, through other characters, disputing the very legitimacy of “legal” and “illegal” as

categories for human beings. Moreover, as I will demonstrate, Viramontes draws on folkloric, religious, and mythological symbolism from Mexican and Chicano/a culture to envision her principle female characters as incarnations of positive female archetypes. By reading Petra (whose name means “rock”) as a character who shares affinities with a feminist version of La Llorona, and Estrella (whose name means “star”) as an empowered Virgin of Guadalupe figure, I contend that Viramontes rewrites the confining virgin/whore binary that dictates female behavior within Mexican and Chicano culture. In doing so, she demands an accounting of space that encompasses *both* socially real *and* culturally symbolic consequences for Chicana women.

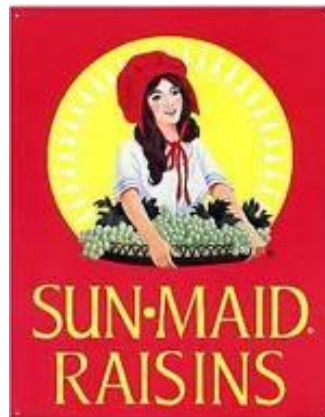
## I

On its official website, the Sun-Maid company—producer of Sun-Maid Raisins from California grapes—provides a brief history of the Sun-Maid girl. Through this revealing “historical” narrative, the company unwittingly advertises its own complicity in promoting a false corporate image of the California grape picker:

Many people want to know if a real person was the original Sun-Maid girl. The answer is ‘Yes,’ and her name was Lorraine Collett Petersen. In May 1915, she was discovered drying her black hair curls in the sunny backyard of her parents' home in Fresno, California. She was then asked to pose for a painting while holding a basket tray of fresh

grapes. This striking image was first applied to packages of Sun-Maid raisins in 1916. Over the years, this image has been seen on millions and millions of packages and has been taken into homes throughout the world. (Sun-Maid)

While the Sun-Maid girl may have been a real person, she was not a real grape picker plucked from the fields, but rather, as the website admits, a pretty white girl who happened to be drying her hair in the California sunshine. Her image thus captures a carefree spirit vastly different from the experiences of the many Mexican and Chicana/o migrant farm workers who labor, as the fictional Estrella does, in “a white sun so mighty, it toasted the green grapes to black raisins” (50).



**Figure 2. Sun-Maid Raisin Girl.  
Image from Sun-Maid Corporation  
Official website. 2010.**

Disseminated on “millions and millions” of raisin boxes since 1915 (and updated in the above version of today), the Raisin box image of a healthy young white woman enjoying her field labors belies the reality of the California grape pickers—most often exploited men, women, and



children of color—whose very health can be threatened by their fieldwork. Reflecting on the image of the happy female farm worker on the Sun-Maid Raisin boxes, Estrella notes that “carrying the full basket” of heavy grapes in the hot sun “was not like the picture on the raisin boxes ... with the woman wearing the fluffy bonnet, holding out the grapes with her smiling, ruby lips” (49). Instead, as Estrella’s observation suggests, the smiling Raisin woman erases the labor of the underage Chicana grape picker in the field and naturalizes a highly contrived advertising image in its place.

Such popular cultural images—whether a corporate creation like the Sun-Maid girl basking in the fruits of her enjoyable labors or the product of selective media spin like the “Migrant Mother” photograph—feed influential assumptions about the race, class, and culture of the American farm worker. The happy Sun-Maid Raisin girl and the unhappy “Migrant Mother,” however different their visual narratives appear, depict the racial profile of the legal U.S. farm worker as an Anglo-American who *belongs*—for better or worse—in the U.S. agricultural landscape. This homogenous cultural construction of the white farmer as the rightful presence in the U.S. agricultural landscape works as a foil to the negatively racialized “illegal alien” Mexican worker who supposedly transgresses the legal and racial boundaries of this landscape; it also erases the “legal” Chicana/o worker’s rightful presence within this geographical terrain.

On the other hand, there is the Chiquita Banana lady. This character first appeared in 1940's commercials as an animated half-banana, half-woman cartoon character. Educating the public about the nutritional value of bananas and helping to boost the Chiquita company's sales, the Chiquita Banana lady represents an edible ethnic commodity and "marketing rep for U.S. exploitation of Latin American labor and natural resources" (Mendible 26). In *From Bananas to Buttocks The Latina Body in Popular Film and Culture* (2007), Myra Mendible writes:

As metonym for Latin America, the Latina body has signaled a permeable racial and national border, a field of diverse oppositions between rationality and sensuality, culture and nature, domestic and foreign. This body metaphor has informed America's defining myths, providing basic themes and motifs for a variety of cultural narratives. Specifically, it has served to justify U.S. corporate exploitation of Latin American labor and resources, invasions and border violations, and the internal colonization of U.S. Latino groups. (26-27)

Mendible points out that mainstream race, gender, and sexuality discourses are essential to the narrative production of national identity in the U.S., and in this sense "the Latina body has played a formative

role in the defining discourses of "America." Since the early nineteenth century, the Latina woman's racially coded sexuality "signaled a threat to the body politic," an alien other "against whom the ideals of the domestic self, particularly its narratives of white femininity and moral virtue, could be defined." Yet the Latina body also offered an exotic object of imperial and sexual desire:

Gendered, raced tropes framed debates about immigration, territorial expansion, and nationhood. More than asserting the United States' difference and independence from Europe, these tropes symbolized its dominant role in the hemisphere. For even as the grand narrative of Anglo-Saxon 'manifest destiny' justified the acquisition of land, it complicated myths of racial and national purity.

Isolationists argued that territorial expansion threatened to contaminate the national body with inferior races. Both those who favored and those who opposed annexation of Mexico employed erotically charged rhetoric to defend their positions. (Mendible 28)

Eventually, Miss Chiquita became a "real" person in commercials: a stereotypical Latina in a vividly colored dress wearing a basket of fruit on her head. Miss Chiquita Banana—the luscious lady of color bearing her fruit—reinforces corporate corporeal exploitation, in which a Latina woman, presumably from Latin America, not only enjoys bearing heavy



**Figure 3. Chiquita Banana Lady.**  
**Image from Chiquita Company official**  
**website. c.1987.<<http://www.chiquita.com>>**

baskets of fruit, she *is* an edible commodity within U.S. consumer culture. Miss Chiquita represents the firmly entrenched dominant cultural narrative in the U.S. that Latino/as, and their country's abundant natural resources—such as Columbia's bananas—exist to serve the American consumer way of life.

The naturalizing of the racial landscape of the U.S. farmlands as white space and the illegal Mexican as violating its hegemonic spatial order (or, in the case of Chiquita banana, existing to serve it) reflects a similar ideology to that critiqued by Hansberry in *A Raisin in the Sun*: the “natural” suburban/pastoral space with its white supremacist order is disrupted by the unnatural or alien urban black presence—a presence

which is only allowed on the limited terms to *serve* white racial hegemony. Hansberry's insertion of Mama, with her black rural southern agricultural background, into the suburban landscape not as a servant but as an equal homeowner to her white neighbors, undermines the narrative of the suburbs as a privileged white space; likewise, Viramontes represents hardworking Chicana farmwomen who are U.S. citizens tending California's agricultural fields to challenge illegal Mexican worker (and Anglo Sun-Maid Raisin girl) stereotypes in the U.S. agricultural economy.

Viramontes' sympathetic portrayal of the farmworkers Petra and Estrella as U.S. citizens of Mexican descent revises narratives that criminalize or omit the Chicana farm workers' legal presence within the U.S. agricultural landscape.<sup>8</sup> Through Petra's constant fear of La Migra, the novel highlights how "illegal alien" stereotypes serve to justify the border patrol's brutal treatment of migrant workers of color, especially those who do not speak English or cannot immediately prove their citizenship.<sup>9</sup> Petra reminds Estrella that if La Migra comes, she should claim her U.S. citizenship:

Don't let them make you feel you did a crime for picking the vegetables they'll be eating for dinner. If they stop you, if they try to pull you into the green vans, you tell them the birth certificates are under the feet of Jesus, just tell them.

(63)

In Viramontes' novel, *La Migra* embodies the unjust legal and physical practices arising from dominant discourses that distort the workers' presence in the U.S. But, as bell hooks suggests, in order to create "counter-hegemonic cultural practices," it is necessary to "identify the spaces where we begin the process of revision" so as to work "against oppressive boundaries set by race, sex, and class domination" (*Yearning* 149). By emphasizing *La Migra*'s unlawful treatment of law-abiding American citizens, Petra's description of the border patrol's actions revises mainstream discourses which represent all migrant workers of Mexican descent as "criminals" within the U.S. border. Moreover, Perfecto's citizenship seems indeterminate. Throughout the novel, he longs to return home to Mexico and does not appear to have the same forms of U.S. identification that Petra carries with her. Viramontes' portrayal of both U.S. *and* non-U.S. citizens as hardworking and law-abiding within the agricultural economy not only challenges criminalizing discourses about migrant workers but also questions the concept of "legal" and "illegal" human beings as a form of spatial injustice.

Petra's vigilant protection of the family's birth certificates represents a pressing need for her family: they must be able to prove their citizenship or they will face deportation. But Petra's protectiveness also symbolizes her need to feel a sense of belonging in a society that often treats Chicana/o migrant workers as invisible. The workers in *Under*

*the Feet of Jesus* continually express doubts about the legitimacy of their very existence. Petra's faith in her legal papers does not alleviate her general anxiety about being unknown in an impersonal landscape: "Petra often feared that she would die and no one would know who she was" (166). Estrella has similar fears when she imagines a young girl's bones found in La Brea Tar Pits: "No details of her life were left behind, no piece of cloth, no ring, no doll. A few bits of bone displayed somewhere under a glass case and nothing else" (129). Literary critic Lena Johannson argues that in terms of "Mexican American history, the story of the West has been one of political and cultural dislocations whose lasting effects reverberate" in the migrant workers' ideas of being lost or forgotten in this landscape (105). Petra's and Estrella's fears of deportation and their sense of social anonymity emphasize the physical and social displacement historically embedded in Mexican and Chicana/o migrant laborers' experiences.

For these workers in Viramontes' novel, who feel "out of place" within the United States' border—homeless, in every sense of the word—home represents a powerful multilayered signifier of place. The "roar" of a train passing by the fields reminds the piscadores of "arrivals and departures, of home and not of home" (55). Perfecto wants to "return home" (78) to his "native soil" (100) of Mexico and worries that he might forget his way back. When Alejo's illness worsens from pesticide poisoning, Perfecto believes that the boy "needs to be home"

(93). The workers' yearnings for home are connected to signifiers of the American West—the border, the railroad, Mexican soil, agricultural pesticides—which reference a complex socio-spatial history of colonization, dislocation, and abuse of Indigenous people and their land in this contested geographical area.

Viramontes' characters longings for *home*—a real and imaginary site of socio-cultural belonging—resonate with Mama's desire to own a home in *A Raisin in the Sun*. In Hansberry's play, Mama's desire signifies a political break from a larger cultural narrative of African American dislocation and displacement. Likewise, Viramontes' narrative emphasizes home and geographical rootedness as both a physical and a cultural imperative for Chicana/o migrants. As Edward Said points out, "the struggle over geography ... is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings" (*Culture* 190-1). The imaginings of home by Viramontes' characters take on geo-historical and cultural significance when we consider that many Chicana/os living in the U.S. Southwest "don't regard themselves as immigrants but as indigenous people who were colonized by EuroAmericans after the Treaty of Guadalupe in 1848 when about half of Mexican territory fell to U.S. citizens" (Grewe-Volpe 73). In Chicana/o culture, the myth of Aztlán claims this current U.S. territory as land rightfully belonging to those of Mexican descent because of its connection to their Indigenous Nahua ancestors.



Michael Kowaleski suggests that “the idea of the West changes significantly when we think of it as *el norte* or *el otro lado* (the other side) or, simply, ‘home’ or the ‘the world’ for tribes whose spiritual connections to their natural surroundings—through oral traditions, communal rituals, and everyday interactions—were established before Europeans arrived” (9-10). As descendants of the Indigenous people of the areas now known as Mexico and the U.S. Southwest, the Chicana/o migrants’ search for a home signifies a complex ethos of cultural longing.

For Petra, this need for home also reflects a desire for order and control in a chaotic and transient existence. The novel’s archetypal maternal figure (she is often referred to simply as “the mother”), Petra embraces the traditionally female role of home-maker by attempting to provide a structured environment for her children in temporary shelters. When the family first arrives at their short-term housing, a rundown bungalow on the fringes of a fruit farm, Petra immediately assesses what needs to be done to domesticate the space: “The grate needed scrubbing and she looked around for horsetail weed, which was just as good for scouring as steel wool” (8). Due to the family’s poverty, however, she is rarely able to keep up with domestic demands. On wash day, for instance, Petra “used the last of the ground yucca roots for soap and had to grind more stiff roots which meant more work. Her knuckles were raw white against coffee skin. The mother used the

remaining rinse water to bathe the twins” (61). The novel makes clear that Petra’s housework is never done, since she must make a home from scratch—scrubbing, sweeping, rearranging—in whatever temporary space the family lives while working.

Christa Grewe-Volpe argues that the physical and economic difficulties Petra faces as a homeless migrant worker highlight the “absurdity of keeping house according to white standards of cleanliness and perfection and as a safe haven against the corruptions of the world” (73). Petra has only limited defenses against the forces of danger. She draws rings in the dirt around the bungalow to protect her children from scorpions; but by the end of the novel, she feels the futility of this effort: “What made her believe that a circle drawn in the earth would keep predators away?” (168). Her “feeble” weapons of “papers and sticks and broken faith and Perfecto” (168) appear as weak protection against “predators” like La Migra, toxic pesticides, and a society that treats her family as criminals.

As a working mother, whose male partner doesn’t participate in the domestic chores of cooking and cleaning, Petra’s domestic challenges in Viramontes’ novel symbolize the kind of double duty female farm workers must perform on a daily basis. Maria Carmona, a co-founder of the Farm Worker Women’s Leadership Project, explains:

Farmwork is hard. After working in the fields, you come home exhausted. As a woman, when you get home, you

don't lay down and rest. ... You have to keep working.  
When you get home, you have to do all of the housework—  
cleaning, sweeping, washing dishes, and cooking. ... That's  
the experience that thousands of farm worker women live  
through everyday. (quoted in Shea 137)

Petra's difficulties in meeting the dual demands of field and domestic labor (while pregnant, caring for her small children, and experiencing excruciating pain in her legs) point to the ways in which female farm laborers are often the most overburdened of agricultural laborers. In Petra, we may again find traces of Hansberry's Mama and of Ruth Younger: Mama, a displaced rural figure, a migrant from the South, and an archetypal matriarch in Hansberry's play, struggles to keep the family together while Ruth faces an unwanted pregnancy, not because she cannot love the child but because of the family's poverty and lack of spatial agency. In Viramontes' novel, the pregnant Petra's ability to keep the family running—she takes on the additional task of caring for the sick Alejo despite her own hardships—also recognizes the courage and strength of women. In its depiction of Petra as a conscientious and hardworking mother, *Under the Feet of Jesus* highlights the attributes of an invisible class of workers in the U.S agribusiness economy while focusing on the contributions of Chicana workers in particular. The novel simultaneously highlights a feminist view of Chicana motherhood, as Petra finds moments of empowerment in the homeplace despite

external social victimization. Viramontes' feminist respect for Chicana motherhood shares affinities with hooks' "'re-visioning' of the idea of 'home'" for black mothers whose commitment to creating home and community, hooks writes, inspires a "political commitment to racial uplift" (1990: 45).

*Under the Feet of Jesus* similarly expresses a political commitment to racial uplift by empowering the Chicana/o workers' presence in the California landscape. The protagonists possess a harmonious connection to the *land* itself. As one who loves "stones," for instance, Alejo believes "himself to be a solid mass of boulder thrust out of the Earth" (52). He imagines his body as a "boulder" and endows himself with the strength of stone and the longevity of the "Earth," affirmative self-images which help him to transcend his everyday feelings of powerlessness and anonymity. As the "rock," Petra also has positive terrestrial associations: she nurses the sick Alejo using medicines from nature and she eats garlic to calm the aching rivers of her veins. Petra's connection to the Earth is emphasized by she reminds Estrella that she "is not an orphan." Petra points "a red finger to the earth, Aqui" (63), asserting that her daughter belongs to the land. Arguably Petra embraces the *mestiza* way, which Anzaldúa contends is the ability of those who live a borderlands existence to create "new symbols" of home to affirm their rightful place on Earth (103-104).<sup>10</sup> In its emphasis on the Chicana/o migrant farm workers' powerful connection to the

natural landscape of the American West, the novel offers a counter-narrative to dominant discourses which portray these workers as transgressors in this geographical area.

The workers' intimate connection to the natural landscape, however, does not romanticize their presence within it. On the contrary, in *Under the Feet of Jesus* the workers toil in poisonous fields, making it physically impossible for them to feel safe in a territory so fraught with danger. Commercial growers in California usually plant garlic bulbs in heavily chemically-fertilized fields. These fields are also treated with toxic fungicides to try to fight soil-borne fungi that are too firmly entrenched from decades of growing almost nothing but garlic. Petra's use of garlic for healing thus may be read as a commentary on how the poisoning of Petra/the Earth are intertwined in the novel. In fact, the novel's imagery repeatedly articulates a "toxic discourse," a term which Lawrence Buell defines as "expressed anxiety from perceived threat of environmental hazard due to chemical modification of human agency" (2001: 31). The presence of dead insects and dead birds around the family's makeshift home acts as an ominous reminder of the toxins sprayed indiscriminately on the fields where the piscadores work. The pregnant Petra often worries about the harmful effects of the pesticides on "the lima bean" growing inside her (142). She wonders fearfully: "Would the child be born without a mouth, would the poisons of the fields harden in its tiny little veins?" (125). Alejo, directly sprayed with

pesticides while secretly gathering peaches from an orchard, will likely die from this exposure. Grewe-Volpe suggests that in *Under the Feet of Jesus* “human and nonhuman, cultural and natural” are represented as “interdependent” so that “anthropocentric and ecocentric criteria cannot be clearly separated” (73). In its linkage of the deadly treatment of nature to the harmful treatment of those who work within it, the novel calls awareness to a form of environmental injustice.<sup>11</sup>

Specifically, the narrative’s representation of how the poisoning of California’s agricultural fields also poisons the Mexican and Chicana/o migrant farm worker symbolizes a larger pattern of systemic abuse of power within the United States’ agribusiness economy known as environmental racism. Reverend Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr., who coined the term “environmental racism” (often used by environmental activists in conjunction with “environmental justice”), defines it in the following way:

Environmental racism is racial discrimination in environmental policy making. It is racial discrimination in the enforcement of regulations and laws. It is racial discrimination in the deliberate targeting of communities of color for toxic waste disposal and the siting of polluting industries. *It is racial discrimination in the official sanctioning of the life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in communities of color.* And it is racial

discrimination in the history of excluding people of color from the mainstream environmental groups, decision making boards, commissions, and regulatory bodies. (3 *emphasis mine*)

As a piece of environmental justice literature, *Under the Feet of Jesus* protests environmental racism by depicting the widespread polluting of agricultural areas where poor Mexican and Chicana/o migrants live and work.

Chavis makes clear that the far-reaching implications of environmental racism include discriminatory laws and a lack of labor regulations for workers of color. In fact, farm workers often get excluded from federal laws that protect other hourly U.S. workers:

[I]t is not unusual for farm workers to labor ten to twelve hours a day, seven days a week, without adequate breaks, food, water, or sanitation facilities. Farm labor is exempt from laws governing the use of child labor. Fourteen-year-olds can work in the fields with no restrictions and thirteen-year-olds may work with parental permission. If a child works on a small farm, she is not covered by labor regulation. (Shea 127)

While such exploitative working conditions—toxic pesticides, unsanitary conditions, and child labor—are rarely glimpsed by the consumer of

California-grown fruits and vegetables, Viramontes' novel foregrounds these issues. Estrella remembers that she was “not more than four when she first accompanied the mother to the fields” (51). As a small child, she watched her pregnant mother working in the fields, who “even then ... seemed old to Estrella. Yet she hauled pounds and pounds of cotton by the pull of her back” (51). The novel's depiction of workers unfit for grueling labor, such as the pregnant Petra, the child Estrella, and seventy-three-year-old Perfecto points to the indifference of agribusiness bosses who hire such laborers and to the effect of environmental racism on these already vulnerable workers.<sup>12</sup>

Silence compounds migrant farm workers' vulnerability. Petra cannot advocate for herself or her children in English, a dilemma that epitomizes the situation of the voiceless migrant worker in America. The workers' lack of verbal power in the dominant language of the U.S.—what Adrienne Rich might call their lack of “verbal privilege”—underscores their traditional powerlessness to assert their rights within the system of exploitation.<sup>13</sup> Estrella, however, refuses to be positioned as this notion of the voiceless, Spanish-speaking migrant worker. When the family seeks treatment for the sick Alejo at a medical clinic, bilingual Estrella translates the white nurse's advice:

—Qué dice del corazón? asked the mother.

—Sweet Jesus, Estrella said. We gotta take him to the hospital in Corazón.



—Esta loca la enferma?

—Amá, Alejo's sicker than we thought.

—He's not our responsibility. This from Perfecto Flores.

—Es la verdad. Su primo Gumecindo lo puedo llevar al hospital. Vámonos, Perfecto.

—You know he's gone back. The mother shrugged her shoulders. I can't believe you, Mama.

—Piénsalo, hija. Does he have papers? What if the hospital reports him?

—He was born in Texas. His grandma was born there too and her grandma. They belong here, Mama.

—Does he have money? You got money? Who's gonna pay? (142-143).

Estrella's insistence that Alejo and his family "belong" in America attempts to alleviate Petra's fear of La Migra, while the chaos of the scene, particularly for the monolingual English-speaking reader accustomed to translation and conventional punctuation, effectively mirrors the daily confusion experienced by a people who live between languages and cultures and do not feel they belong entirely to either one.<sup>14</sup>

In her deliberate acquisition of English language skills as a "tool" (26) for survival in a hostile world, Estrella clearly embraces a *mestiza*

consciousness, especially as she helps the family navigate marginal spaces to gain survival in the dominant culture. Anzaldúa writes,

Because the future depends on the breaking down of paradigms, it depends on the straddling of two or more cultures. By creating a new mythos—that is, a change in the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves, and the ways we behave—la mestiza creates a new consciousness. (102)

In her ability to advocate for Alejo, Estrella offers hope for the future because she is able to break down the paradigm of the migrant worker who lacks the language skills to fight for workers' rights within the dominant culture.<sup>15</sup>

In the medical clinic, Estrella also employs another kind of tool— a crowbar—to force the nurse to respect the family. In her act of rebellion, Estrella sees the nurse's indifference to the family's economic hardships as part of a larger cycle of exploitation:

Alejo was sick and the nine dollars was gas money. She remembered the tar pits. Energy money, the fossilized bones of energy matter. How bones made oil and oil made gasoline. The oil was made from their bones, and it was their bones that kept the nurse's car from not halting on some highway, kept her on her way to Daisyfield to pick up

her boys at six. It was their bones that kept the air conditioning in their cars humming, that kept them moving on the long dotted line on the map. Their bones. Why couldn't they see that? Estrella had it figured out: the nurse owed them as much as they owed her. (148)

Here Estrella begins to discern how the commodification of the workers bodies, their actual bones, keeps the capitalist consumer economy humming along. As Ana María Manzanás Calvo points out, “the gradual unpacking of the fuel metaphor” constitutes “Estrella’s realization of her role and her value as a migrant worker, as well as her awareness of the dynamics of economic exploitation in the fields” (769). Estrella’s attack on the white American nurse, whose indifferent attitude toward Alejo’s illness typifies U.S. apathy to migrant workers’ health issues, symbolizes rebellion against the whole system of environmental and social injustice. Estrella’s growing consciousness of how capitalist/post-colonial forces dictate the material conditions of the workers’ lives expresses a Thirdspace critique whereby, as Soja might argue, the Eurocentric “silencing of peripheral voices and alternative points of view” are called into question:

Allowing the ‘subaltern’ to speak, to assert an-Other voice, pushes the discourse on to a different plane and into a recreative space of radical openness where both

development and social justice can be revisioned together, along with their histories and geographies . . . . As with Thirdspace . . . it is an invitation to continuous deconstruction and reconstitution, to a constant effort to move beyond the established limits of our understanding of the world. (1996: 126)

Estrella's violent anger toward the nurse moves her outside of her marginalized place as a silent Other. Instead, Estrella inhabits a new location that questions the established limits of a hegemonic capitalist order. The scene makes clear that external factors—the nurse's refusal to recognize the value of Perfecto's labor as payment for the medical bill, the family's economic desperation, and the voracious capitalist system that feeds on the workers' bodies—drive Estrella to her “criminal act” and not some inherent character defect. Estrella's resistance to victimization signifies resistance to cultural and spatial practices that degrade or erase migrant workers of color and the value of their labor in the U.S. agricultural economy.

Chicana feminist resistance to hegemonic cultural and spatial practices occurs not only from a *mestiza* location within U.S. dominant culture but also from an equally marginalized space within patriarchal Mexican and Chicano culture. Quiñonez writes that Chicana

feminist writers often find ways to “reconstruct new visions, new worlds,” to create new spaces of “self-perception” for the purpose of “transcending oppression” through the images in their writing (142).

Brady echoes these observations when she writes,

Chicana literature has consistently offered alternative methods of conceptualizing space . . . by seeing and feeling space as performative and participatory, that is, by refusing a too-rigid binary between the material and the discursive.

(6)

As I have discussed at length, *Under the Feet of Jesus* highlights and critiques the power of U.S. dominant cultural narratives to shape material spatial experiences for Chicano/a migrants in the United States. I now turn to how the novel engages with and revises oppressive narratives for Chicana women *within* Mexican and Chicano culture. In reading Petra as a sympathetic maternal figure who shares affinities with La Llorona, and Estrella as an empowered Virgin of Guadalupe, I contend that Viramontes endows these folkloric and religious figures with attributes of pre-colonial, pre-Aztec Indigenous deities. In doing so, I suggest that the novel uses these symbolic female figures to rewrite the masculine boundaries of Mexican and Chicano female cultural archetypes.

La Llorona, the weeping or wailing woman, while variously

envisioned in Mexican and Chicano cultural traditions, is usually depicted as a figure of maternal destruction and selfishness, much as La Malinche is characterized as a traitorous whore. On the other hand, the Virgin of Guadalupe, a salvation figure who first appeared to an Indigenous boy, symbolizes maternal nurturing and selflessness. Because these polarized figures do not allow for a unified or wholly empowered female subject, many Chicana feminists view them as narrowly defining a woman's agency as either self-serving or selfless, confining it within prescribed patriarchal boundaries of female behavior. As Ana Maria Carbonell argues, "such pervasive denigration of female agency" creates "a dualistic structure that attempts to police female behavior by extolling the Virgin's passivity and selflessness," thereby divesting her of any "rebellious, proactive potential," while "denigrating figures who take action, such as La Malinche and La Llorona, as selfish and destructive" (3). Yet many Chicana feminists argue that these figures spring from cultural antecedents who stand outside the confines of such masculine interpretations of female behavior; as Anzaldúa writes, "the first step to unlearn the *puta/virgen* dichotomy [is] to see Coatlatlopeuh-Coatlicue in the Mother, Guadalupe" (106).

In "Indianizing Catholicism," Yolanda Broyles-González points out that during the early Spanish colonial period, Indigenous oral tradition often identified the Virgin of Guadalupe not as a passive virgin, but as a

deity associated “with the dual forces of nature (terrestrial and celestial), women’s power, and the life struggles of indigenous peoples against colonial powers” (134). Similarly, Anzaldúa links the Virgin of Guadalupe as a “descendant,” or “aspect of, earlier Mesoamerican fertility and Earth goddesses,” whose duality and sexuality were appropriated, desexed, and split apart by Spanish colonialism (49). Because the historical correlation between the female subject and her subsequent cultural denigration is so clear, many Chicana feminists find that linking post-colonial female cultural icons to their Indigenous antecedents enables them to turn traditionally oppressive cultural narratives into feminist sites of resistance.

Modern day Chicana/o resistance to oppression operates both politically and culturally (Quiñonez 140). Quiñonez cites Edward Said’s interpretation of cultural resistance as an “insistence on the right to see the community’s history as a whole, coherent, and integral part of the larger culture,” as opposed to a disenfranchised, fragmented, and marginalized borderlands’ identity (141). This insistence on a coherent identity extends to Chicana feminist re-interpretations of female archetypes. Within both oral and written narratives, La Llorona most often emerges as “a physical threat and a gender-coded allegory for proscribing certain behaviors for Mexican and Chicana women” (Pérez 109). In such narratives, she is the weeping woman said to have drowned her children out of vengeance for a lover’s betrayal, and now

she haunts the rivers and streams, weeping for her lost children. However, Chicana feminists question prevailing misogynistic interpretations of La Llorona, particularly those which view her as a figure of maternal destruction, and deem it unfair to judge her actions separate from the colonial and “hierarchical social system that surrounds her” (Carbonell 3).<sup>16</sup> Many feminists instead view La Llorona as a figure of maternal resistance within colonial Mexico: a woman who kills her children not because she is vengeful, but to “defend them against the aggression of the conquistadors” known for stealing beautiful Indian children as “gifts” (slaves) for their wives:

In these La Llorona tales of resistance, maternal identity resembles feminist psychoanalytic definitions of the female “self-in-relation,” an interdependent versus a dependent or independent self. ... The community to which the maternal self belongs is comprised of dependent children. Therefore, the maternal self is responsible for defending her own welfare as well as that of her children. (Carbonell 3)

Such tales of resistance give discursive form to what Anzaldúa names a “Coatlicue state,” an “archetype” that “represents the duality” of female responsibility and independence (68). For Chicana feminists in particular, La Llorona symbolizes both colonial and postcolonial oppression of women by socio-spatial, economic, and patriarchal forces.



As a maternal-self-in-relation to her children, Petra may be read within this context as well.

While Petra does not kill her children to save them from a life of slavery (like the feminist version of La Llorona), she does make another choice-less maternal decision. Petra puts her children's health at risk by allowing them to work in slave-like conditions in toxic fields rather than see them go hungry because she cannot afford to feed them on her wages. A mother who wants "her children to stay innocent and honest ... [but] forced them to be older for their own safety" (40), Petra also embodies what Anzaldúa calls La Llorona's "long-suffering" quality (53). Like the feminist version of the wailing La Llorona, Petra chides and wails at her children when she feels unable to protect them:

The mother yelled No and Estrella should have been safely tucked away like the other women of the camp because of the moon and the earth and the sun's alignment was a powerful thing. Unborn children lurking in their bodies were in danger of having their lips bitten like the hare on the moon if nothing was done to protect them. Is that what you want, the mother yelled, a child born sin labios? Without a mouth? And Estrella looked out to the barn. Behind her something dunked water, and Estrella listened. A frog splashed somewhere perhaps or someone skipped a rock above the water of the irrigation ditch. (69)

Anzaldúa describes La Llorona's wailing as "the Indian, Mexican and Chicana woman's feeble protest when she has no other recourse" (55). Here Petra takes on a similar role of the protesting woman who feels powerless to protect her child from "lurking dangers." When Estrella hears her mother's shouts, she also hears water splashing, another subtle allusion to La Llorona.

In feminist versions of La Llorona, water symbolizes the mother's desire to save her children by drowning them and her wailing denotes sorrow that she could not better protect them. Similarly, Petra's wails and water imagery in the yelling scene express Petra's desire to "save" Estrella from harm, possibly an unwanted pregnancy. Here Petra's references to the earth and moon allude to the dual embodiment of the "terrestrial and celestial" forces of nature identified within Indigenous oral tradition as powerful female attributes. Here these female aspects are in alignment with the male Aztec principle of the sun.<sup>17</sup> But because the Aztecs crushed the female principles inherent in Indigenous deities, the alignment of female and male in this instance, as Petra notes, connotes a dangerous, unnatural form of fertility (mouth-less children).<sup>18</sup> Petra's (like a feminist La Llorona's) wailing signifies a maternal desire to have a "voice" with which to protect her children. Carbonell writes that "contemporary Llorona tales" which view this figure as a symbol of maternal protection within a system of racial, economic, and patriarchal domination help to "give voice to the violated

Latina mother” (1). As a sympathetic (but, at times, helplessly harmful) maternal figure who is a victim within an oppressive social context, Petra shares strong affinities with a contemporary feminist version of La Llorona.

Feminist resistance stories carve out new narrative spaces for “La Llorona’s tales of betrayal by teasing out and highlighting constructive indigenous figures already inscribed within this hybrid figure”

(Carbonell 4). These Indigenous figures are often the goddesses who have descended from Coatlicue (Snake Skirt), among them Cihuacoatl (Snake Woman), a powerful woman warrior and a patroness of midwives and of agriculture, who, like her precursor, embodies a holistic figure that embraces both death and creation. Feminists have drawn the connection between Cihuacoatl and La Llorona, particularly in their associations of Cihuacoatl as a weeping or wailing woman, who is said to have appeared as a harbinger of death, wailing and foreboding war (5). Viramontes’ representation of Petra alludes to these revisionist representations of La Llorona by depicting Petra as a victimized mother who often predicts foreboding or “lurking dangers” for her children while simultaneously endowing her with symbolic Earth Mother healing qualities of powerful Indigenous goddesses. Petra/La Llorona/Cihuacoatl embodies contradictions and dualities, and challenges the rigid virgin/whore binary that dictates female behavior within Mexican and Chicano culture.

*Under the Feet of Jesus* further rewrites the traditional La Llorona story by invoking her as an unlikely friend of children while Gumecindo and Alejo steal peaches from an orchard:

Gumecindo found the dark and the screaming hours before frightening. His cousin had not stopped talking of La Llorona and the ghosts of her drowned children, and Alejo was forced to hear the stories with every tree he climbed. No, Gumecindo wanted him to hurry not because of the Foreman or loss of employment. La Llorona was more threatening. (39)

La Llorona's foreboding presence in this scene warns the boys to protect themselves from the pesticide poisoning. One critic suggests that because the boys misinterpret La Llorona's cry in a traditional context as "a threat rather than aid," they are later endangered by the crop duster's pesticides (Pérez 108). I would also add that the novel's warning to all Chicanos to hear La Llorona's wails as protective cries against destructive colonial forces, represented in the orchard scene as a "shower of white pesticide" (Viramontes 76), echoes the warning cries of Cihuacoatl, who is said to have warned Indigenous people of their eventual devastation under colonial rule. I suggest that Viramontes' narrative, like other feminist resistance tales, inscribes aspects of Cihuacoatl within La Llorona not as a hybrid figure to be feared by

children but rather as one to be heeded for her deep knowledge. The boys' inability to read La Llorona's cries as a warning suggest the Chicano patriarchy's inability to recognize her positive strengths. This gender binary in the novel alludes, in my reading, to Viramontes' point that Chicanos and Chicanas remain culturally polarized within the boundaries of a larger system of U.S. dominant cultural oppression.

The distinctively Christian imagery of this scene also denotes the powerful presence of religious oppression. For when Alejo sees the plane's "gray shadow over him like a crucifix," the boy wails that he is "sorry, Lord, so sorry": a prayer reminiscent of Catholic penitence (Viramontes 40). The pesticide scene's symbolic evocation of Catholic imagery as overpowering an Indigenous boy resonates with the Virgin of Guadalupe story. As Jeanette Roderiguez explains, the Virgin of Guadalupe's historical appearance in Mexico underscores the inherent discrepancies between Indigenous beliefs and Roman Catholic religion.

Within Roman Catholic tradition, Our Lady of Guadalupe is a Virgin Mary figure; however within Mexican and Chicano culture she is a mestiza, a mixture of both Spanish and Indian. The Nahuatl worshipped a number of goddesses, with both masculine and feminine principles, and yet colonial evangelization taught that the Christian God, an emphatically male principle, had more power than Indigenous gods. Roderiguez contends that Indigenous goddesses, who once reigned supreme, "were subjected to the imposition of a single, male,

Christian god” (5). Broyles-González similarly describes how the sacred Indigenous figure that became the Virgin of Guadalupe suffered various abuses and appropriations during the Spanish conquest and, subsequently, by the Catholic Church:

[T]he Spanish transphoneticized her Indian name into the Spanish name ‘Guadalupe’ and the Catholic Church appropriated the Indian mother as “Santa María de Guadalupe”—but not before waging an all-out war against her. Spanish church leaders correctly saw in her a subversive reaffirmation of indigenous spirituality, the consummate Indianization of Catholicism, the colonization of the colonizer. (123)

Affirming the Virgin of Guadalupe as both Indigenous and powerfully female affirmed “native practices in the face of extreme colonial persecution and genocide” (124). The Catholic Church’s inability to completely eliminate “the female principle of Guadalupe marked the failure of the colonial will to subjugate the native in general and (symbolically) native women in particular” (124). In Chicana/o culture, the Virgin of Guadalupe continues to negotiate this dialectical posture between Catholic theology and Indigenous beliefs, or what Anzaldúa calls a “folk Catholicism with pagan elements” (49). Echoed in the novel’s depiction of Estrella as an empowered Virgin figure who

intervenes on behalf of the farm worker Alejo, the Virgin of Guadalupe's historical role as a salvation figure who intervenes for justice for Indigenous people contains not only religious but also social resonance for Mexicans and Chicana/os.

Just as Father Hidalgo rallied the people under the banner of Our Lady of Guadalupe during the Mexican Revolution in 1821, so César Chávez did in the 1960s to inspire farm workers to fight for their rights as laborers. When the United Farm Workers' strikers marched from the grape fields of California to Sacramento, one of the banners they carried pictured the Virgin of Guadalupe. Yet despite the Virgin's image of strength in popular Chicano culture, many Chicana feminists still find the Virgin figure problematic. Because she is traditionally depicted as selfless in relationship to others – “a passive figure created by the patriarchy” – many Chicanas such as Tey Diana Rebolledo see the Virgin as a figure who “advocates acceptance and endurance, rather than action” (53). Rebolledo quotes the following lines by Carmen Tafolla to illustrate the complex, even rebellious position some feminists take toward the Virgin of Guadalupe:

If I gathered roses for you . . .

. . . . .

–would my jeans jacket sprout

an embroidered vision

of the same old Lupe

with stars in her cloak  
 but standing on a pick up  
 truck with melons? (53)

These lines suggest that for many Chicana feminists the Virgin's lack of action is unacceptable.

Yet in *Estrella*, Viramontes depicts an empowered Virgin of Guadalupe figure. When Alejo first spies Estrella, she appears like “a silhouette” (39) against the river much like the sacred figure of the Virgin of Guadalupe appeared as an apparition to an Indigenous boy. Alejo watches Estrella “follow [a] watermelon downstream until it was close enough to the edge and she could reach for it. But it slipped and bobbed idly away” (39). When the girl cannot reach the melon, she sheds her clothing and swims after it. Far from embodying passivity, Estrella is active, unafraid of revealing her body and braving the cold water to save the melon. Here, Estrella symbolizes a Virgin of Guadalupe figure through Alejo's worshipful adoration of her as “the woman who swam in the magnetic presence of the full moon, a Woman named star,” and as one who has the power to save (the watermelon). Star and moon imagery are traditionally associated with the Virgin of Guadalupe. Grewe-Volpp points out, too, that Viramontes' use of “moon” imagery in connection with Estrella alludes to “the MesoAmerican fertility and Earth goddess *Coatlalopeuh*, mother of celestial deities, who was driven underground by Aztec culture” (67).



Symbolically associated with Coatloapeuh/Virgin of Guadalupe, Estrella represents positive female strength in the novel. From her fight with the white girl who insults her family, to her later defiant confrontation with the nurse, to becoming a savior figure for the sick Alejo, Estrella carves out a new space of womanhood for herself which embodies determination and agency rather than passivity and helplessness.<sup>19</sup>

The end of Viramontes' novel makes this hinted-at feminist alternative blatant. Men, both literally and figuratively, have failed to offer Petra's family any security. Estrella's father has long-ago abandoned them; Perfecto seems ready to leave; the head on the statue of Jesucristo falls off. The females, however, emerge resistant, nurturing, and strong. Petra nevertheless puts her faith in the male powers of protection, holding firmly to the fallen head of Jesucristo, believing that if "anyone can fix it, Perfecto could" (169). Estrella, by contrast, asserts her independence, and represents a new feminist alternative to her mother's traditional role. Figuratively speaking, at the end of *Under the Feet of Jesus* a brave new Virgin of Guadalupe—Estrella—becomes the maternal possibility that La Llorona—and Petra—suggested but could not realize. In the novel's final scene, Estrella climbs into the loft of the barn and is "bathed in a flood of a gray light," a light reminiscent of "the gray shadow" that loomed ominously over Alejo's ill-fated head in the peach orchard (39, 196). Unlike Alejo,

Estrella does not experience disaster in this ominous light, but instead finds power and redemption. Like the Virgin of Guadalupe, she is surrounded by a “sparkle of stars” as she heaves “herself up into the panorama of the skies as if she were climbing out of a box” (175). Under Estrella “the termite-softened shakes crunched beneath her bare feet like the serpent under the feet of Jesus” (175). The elements of this scene combine traditional Catholic imagery (Jesus, the serpent, the barn reminiscent of the manger, Estrella’s heart like the “chiming bells of the great cathedrals,” 176) with Indigenous imagery (the stars, the birds, and the serpentine imagery). This scene reclaims and reaffirms Indigenous spirituality while endowing the Virgin of Guadalupe, a migrant laborer girl-child, with newfound power. This Virgin climbs outside of her place constructed by colonial forces, whether the Catholic Church or Chicano patriarchy or agribusiness’ bosses and willfully believes “her heart powerful enough to summon home all those who strayed” (176).

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The female protagonists in *Under the Feet of Jesus* symbolically map, resist, and, at times, overcome the physical borders and cultural boundaries which confine the figure of the Chicana migrant worker in a dualistic binary as either victim or transgressor. Rose argues that because feminists “want to be neither the victim nor the perpetrator of the experiences of displacement, exile, imprisonment or erasure,” their

work includes a “resistance to the exclusions of dominant subjectivities ... articulated through spatial images” (150). Similarly, Anzaldúa argues that “the work of the [feminist] mestiza consciousness is to break down the subject/object duality that keeps [the Chicana] prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended” (102). Literally ending in an image of female transcendence with Estrella bursting into the starry heavens, *Under the Feet of Jesus* expresses multiple feminist narratives that pluralize rather than polarize female agency. Because these narratives critique both the physical borders of environmental injustice and the cultural boundaries of oppressive dominant cultural stereotypes, they suggest that transcending violent material spatial practices remains closely linked to cultural change.

Soja’s argument that the social production of cultural and representational space “begins with the body, with the construction and performance of ... the human subject, as a distinctively spatial entity involved in a complex relation with our surroundings” (6) gets dramatized in Viramontes’ novel. In the medical clinic scene, Estrella sees the “nurse’s white uniform and red lipstick” and smells her perfume like a “flood of carnations” and feels “self-conscious” (137). While Perfecto caught sight of his face in the silver towel dispenser and realized how “dirty his face was” (137). The workers’ self-consciousness about their physical bodies in relationship to unfamiliar spaces—in this

case, the hyper-sanitized medical clinic—is reminiscent of the young Estrella’s encounter with a teacher in school who treats her as if she is “dirty” because she is a farm worker, emphasizing how the workers’ bodies are socially constructed in various negative ways in relationship to the work they perform and the surroundings they regularly inhabit (25). Her body viewed by the larger culture as either “dirty,” or, even worse, as no-body, Estrella can neither reconcile her own experience with the image of the Sun-Maid “woman with the fluffy bonnet” nor with the white nurse with her “fresh coat of red lipstick” (137). Viramontes’ novel shows us how hegemonic cultural discourses very often get *written onto* corporeal space.

The spatialization of social and cultural hegemony also gets enacted in concrete manifestations, such as the design and enforcement of marginalized geographical spaces as seen in the U.S. borderlands; or in broader terms, gets metaphorically expressed in bodily terms as seen in the transgressive body of the “illegal alien” in the U.S. cultural landscape or in the virgin/whore paradigm for women within patriarchal Mexican and Chicano culture. *Under the Feet of Jesus* exposes ideological narratives and material processes of space and place for migrant farm workers living a borderlands’ existence in the United States. The novel simultaneously writes the body and full humanity of the Chicana *back into* the representational space of the American West—giving form to invisibility and voice to silence.

### Chapter 3

#### **“Knowing the World and My Place in It”: Mapping the Politics of Location and Nation in Rich’s *Native Land***

The spatial practice of a society is revealed through the deciphering of its space.

– Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*

Western discourse often perceives “the nation,” argues Henri Lefebvre, as “a sort of substance which has sprung up from nature (or more specifically from a territory with ‘natural’ borders),” creating a vision of “nationalism as ‘natural.’” Concurrently, the nation gets figured as a culturally unified space, giving the illusion of “national solidarity” which “masks class contradictions” (Lefebvre 1991: 112). Lefebvre critiques these twin concepts of nation—as natural bordered territory and culturally unified space—for eliding how world market economics, including “the operational spheres of multinational corporations,” social hierarchies, and “the violence of a military state” combine “forces” to produce “the space of the nation state” (112).

If we apply Lefebvre’s critique of nationalism to dominant cultural ideals of nationhood in the United States, we see these elisions at work. Loyalty to the nation requires its citizens to pledge patriotic allegiance to its flag, a symbol of its harmonious *physical* unity, and to assimilate into its dominant “American” *culture*. These cultural rituals of “democratic” unity reinforce the need to fortify the nation’s “homeland” borders against un-American invaders, outsiders, and foreigners.<sup>1</sup>

Idealized as a homogeneous geographical cum cultural landscape, this political construct as “imagined community” deletes the politics of its own making.<sup>2</sup> Nationalism “constitutes the nation as above politics,” writes Jan Pettman, “this is the extraordinary power of the nation as the thing which people will kill and die for” (as quoted in Domosh 534). Ideologically speaking, an “American” national identity works equally well to disguise the imperialistic impulses of the U.S. government’s military practices abroad and to serve its ruling class and corporate interests by masking the inequalities of race, class, gender, religious, and environmental warfare at “home.”

As I have shown in Chapter One, the historically aggressive social and spatial politics of what represents “American-ness” in the U.S. often gets played out at the regional and local level. In Hansberry’s play, the race-and-class divisions of segregated Chicago neighborhoods become a microcosm of the larger (and often ignored) insider/outsider politics of the nation’s mid-twentieth-century American Dream. In Chapter Two, I demonstrate how Viramontes’ novel critiques nationalistic legal measures (i.e. border patrols) and mainstream rhetoric (immigrant stereotypes) in California. These official and unofficial enforcements of nationalism become the means of criminalizing those who do not fit the “American” mold of its romanticized Anglo-agricultural landscape, such as migrant farmworkers of Mexican descent. In this chapter, I turn to Adrienne Rich’s *Your Native Land, Your Life* (1986). This collection of

poems, I argue, draws on Rich's "politics of location" to expose what Lefebvre would call the "illusion of transparency" in the idea of a homogenous "American" national identity.

Like Lefebvre's challenge to unified ideals of nationhood in Western discourse, Rich's influential essay, "Notes toward a Politics of Location," disputes a standardized norm of national identity in the U.S. as an illusory—and often oppressive—"white and Western" patriarchal construct ("Notes" 1984: 216). She rejects, in particular, dominant cultural assimilation "in the name of becoming 'American'" (212, 210). Instead she argues that the "politics of location"—one's gender, race, class, religion, and sexuality in combination with one's literal "place on the map"—dictate a person's identity and environmental experiences within the dominant U.S. culture (216; 212). As my argument will show, Rich's representation of the politics of location—her own and others—in her *Native Land* collection maps these social hierarchies embedded in "American" nationhood and their influence on the land itself.

Focusing on the collection's first long poetry sequence, "Part I: Sources," and key passages from "Part II: North American Time," I demonstrate how Rich critiques homogenous nationhood in the U.S. as a white, Western patriarchal familial construct during and after World War Two. As Rich's work reveals, this all "American" ideal both creates and ignores the pressures of dominant cultural assimilation for marginalized groups, the oppression of women in domestic spaces, and

the ongoing exploitation of Indigenous people's tribal lands.<sup>3</sup> Specifically I trace how Rich uses her own familial politics of location as both "white" and "Jewish" living in the dominant white, Christian culture of the Southern United States during the war. In doing so, I argue, she calls attention both to "whiteness" and "Jewishness" as socially constructed racial categories that are both inside and outside of a nationalized (white, Christian) American family identity. I also show how Rich connects her formative years raised in her father's patriarchal "family home" as symptomatic of dominant cultural assimilation forced upon Jewish "Americans" in the WWII era and as part of the larger historical legacy of Western colonialism in the U.S. As "Sources" makes clear, the early white Christian settlers' insistence on religious *and* geographical dominance in the Americas left in its wake oppressive cultural and ecological practices still evident in contemporary nation-building. My argument will conclude that Rich's ability to find connections between cultural hegemony and social and ecological hierarchies embedded in the "American" landscape signifies an ecocritical literary consciousness not often recognized in her work.

I

When I speak of an end to suffering I don't mean anesthesia.  
I mean knowing the world and my place in it.

—Adrienne Rich, *Your Native Land, Your Life*

Born in 1929, Rich's childhood coincided with the formation of the American nation as white, patriarchal, familial space. According to



the popular eugenics and racial hygiene theorists of the nineteen-twenties and thirties, white, Anglo-Saxon-ness was the pure American race which needed protection from impure races, such as Jews, Blacks, Asians, Indians, and other people of color. This racist ideal grew out of the nineteen-twenties' nativism, a nationalistic movement defined by Walter Benn Michaels as an "intense opposition to an internal minority on the grounds of its foreign ('un-American') connection," an opposition which fed "the connecting, energizing force of modern nationalism" (2).<sup>4</sup> Because nativism constructed the American nation as familial space, the need to "keep someone in [or out of] the family" defined the cultural terms of national identity (3). Michaels points out, for example, that "nativism made anti-Semitism an element of cultural citizenship and therefore an essential aspect of American identity regardless of how one felt personally about individualized Jews" (10). A good American might buy goods from a Jewish shopkeeper, but he certainly wouldn't let his daughter marry that shopkeeper. This fear of miscegenation or familial/cultural contamination through marriage meant maintaining the purity of the family/native country by defining who was pure ("white") and who was not ("alien"). By the time of the Second World War, nativism's construction of the American nation as a homogenous white racial landscape maintained by racist, anti-Semitic patriarchal family life became naturalized within mainstream U.S. discourse.

In “Sources” Rich represents her Jewish father as living *both* inside *and* outside of this nationalized identity during World War II. Bearing both “the face of patriarchy” and the “alien stamp” of a Jew, he strictly enforced his daughter’s assimilation into the dominant U.S. culture, especially the white Christian culture of the South in which they lived (VII. 9,15). Acknowledging the social privileges and emotional costs of her assimilated “safe/American” childhood, Rich writes,

*split at the root*    white skinned social Christian  
*neither gentile nor jew*  
 through the immense silence  
 of the Holocaust  
 I had no idea of what I had been spared  
 still less of the women and men    my kin  
 the Jews of Vicksburg or Birmingham  
 whose lives must have been strategies no less  
 than the vixen’s on Route 5. (V.6-17)<sup>5</sup>

Rich’s racial location as white when combined with her Jewish identity (a racialized outsider before and during WWII), challenges the notion of cultural assimilation for Jewish Americans in the early postwar years. Anthropologist and race theorist Karen Brodtkin points out that after the war, “Jews could become Americans and Americans could be like Jews,” but the horrors of the Holocaust and the creation of Israel “gave Jews a

critical distance from the mainstream American whiteness, a sense of otherness” even while being “embraced by the mainstream” (140-141). With her Jewish father's ability to assimilate as white and thus be like her gentile mother, Rich inherits a personal identity of belonging yet not belonging within the dominant culture, or what Brodtkin would call a form of “quasi integration” (141).

Rich’s racial location as both white and Jewish in the U.S. calls attention to the politics of difference overlooked by the idea of a homogeneous white race and speaks to the ways in which racial identity gets socially constructed in relationship to nationhood. Given that Jews have “at different times and from varying political standpoints, been viewed as both ‘white’ and ‘nonwhite’” in mainstream American culture (Frankenberg 3), Rich emphasizes her assimilated location as a “white skinned social Christian” to define whiteness itself as a socially constructed and historically shifting racial category for Jewish people. As she writes in a later passage, “the Jews [she has] felt rooted among/are those who were turned to smoke” (XVI. 1-2). This reminder of the Third Reich’s genocidal project to create a racially homogeneous Aryan nation-state, a fatherland stripped of the Jewish race, signifies the violence inherent in homogenous nation building. As Lefebvre puts it, “nationhood implies *violence*—the violence of a military state, be it feudal, bourgeois, imperialist, or some other variety. It implies . . . a political power controlling and exploiting . . . in order to further its rule”

(112). In “Sources” Rich finds an emotional connection to those Jews in Europe who died during the racial genocide of the Holocaust and to those marginalized Jews in the U.S., like her father, who were forced to disappear behind the “smoke”-screen of assimilation to avoid racial persecution.

In an essay on gender and Jewish identity in the U.S. written during the same period as the *Native Land* poems, Rich admits that she did not always feel these sympathetic connections to her father, a patriarchal figure in her family home. Because of her father's domineering personality, she once “saw Judaism simply as another strand of patriarchy” (“Split” 122). In “Sources,” however, she recognizes the push for patriarchal domesticity by Jewish men like her father as a reaction to dominant cultural assimilation in the U.S., since early postwar white American masculinity depended so heavily on this gendered domestic paradigm (Brodkin 161). Identifying her father's “rootless ideology” (VI.12) as the center of patriarchal power in her family, she sees his building a “private castle in air” as symptomatic of the pressures of cultural conformity. Addressing her father, Rich writes:

I saw the power and arrogance of the male as your true watermark; I did not see beneath it the suffering of the Jew, the alien stamp you bore, because you had deliberately arranged that it should be invisible to me. It is only now,

under a powerful, womanly lens, that I can decipher your suffering and deny no part of my own. (VII. 14-18)

As these lines make clear, her father's politics of location as an assimilated Jew and a patriarchal male in early postwar U.S. culture makes him both a victim and oppressor within a larger system of social hierarchies that hide beneath the veneer of homogeneous American-ness.

Rich's image of the "vixen"—an animal that employs cunning and camouflage for survival from predators—signifies this liminal racial/cultural identity for assimilated Jews. Those "Southern Jew[s]" like Rich's relatives "whose lives must have been strategies no less/than the vixen's" would have either hidden or given up their orthodox religious practices in order to assimilate into the dominant culture. For her father, this survival strategy included adopting a superior attitude towards women in the domestic space of the family home (I.8-12). If we consider the sexist connotations of "vixen," a term used to disparage women as sexually seductive wild animals that need to be domesticated or tamed, Rich's mother fox "herding her cubs / in the silvery bend of the road" in one way suggests this patriarchal domination of women, especially through language.

Such language use in patriarchal Western cultures has, as ecofeminists argue, historically "served as justification for domination of women, animals, and the earth" (Warren 5). Karen Warren, for example,

critiques language used to describe women and animals in patriarchal discourse as “sexist/naturist”:

Women are described in animal terms as pets, cows, sows, foxes, chicks, serpents, bitches, beavers, old bats, old hens, mother hens, pussycats, cats, cheetahs, birdbrains, and harebrains. Animalizing or naturalizing women in a (patriarchal) culture where animals are seen as inferior to humans (men) thereby reinforces and authorizes women’s inferior status. Similarly, language which feminizes nature in a (patriarchal) culture where women are viewed as subordinate and inferior reinforces and authorizes the domination of nature . . . The exploitation of nature and animals is justified by feminizing them; the exploitation of women is justified by naturalizing them. (12)

Through the struggling vixen—depicted in “Sources” as a mother/survivor figure pitted against oppressive anti-Semitic *and* patriarchal forces—we see an ecofeminist viewpoint emerging in Rich’s work, a view that interconnects the patriarchal oppression of women, marginalized people, and non-human nature. In Rich’s poem, the oppression of Jews and women as inferior in mainstream postwar American culture symbolically mirrors the treatment of animals as inferior to human beings (and therefore exploitable) within a Western capitalist development paradigm.<sup>6</sup> Even more specifically, when read within the context of patriarchal nationhood in the United States, anti-

Semitism and sexism get figured through the struggling vixen as mutually reinforcing forms of dominant cultural oppression.

Rich's female fox as a strategic matriarchal figure successfully protecting her family against these oppressive forces simultaneously signals a positive feminist alternative to both patriarchal authority and dominant cultural conformity. Stephen Paul Miller views Rich's vixen, for example, as "a model of hope in the anti-Equal Rights Amendment political environment of the early eighties" (178). Miller sees the fox's strategies for surviving predatory attacks as an acknowledgement of Rich's own feminist survival tactics within a "national moment of conservative male supremacy" (178). The female fox likewise highlights Rich's argument with the gender inequalities of 1950's family life and its connection to the patriarchal agenda of nationalism. For Rich, the naturalizing of the postwar American nation as a hetero-normative patriarchal family home becomes an oppressive spatial ideology that she, vixen-like, adopts feminist strategies to "survive" (IV.8).

Paralleling enforced dominant-culture assimilation in the nation with patriarchal dominance in the family home, the key themes of Rich's poem echo those of feminist cultural geographers who argue that in nationalistic and imperial discourses, the nation is often conceptualized in familial terms:

If the nation is often defined in distinction to those not  
belonging, those who do belong are often discursively

figured as a family, people tied together by “natural” bonds of blood or race. In this way, the nation is imagined as a home, as a domestic and secure space, in distinction to the foreign and threatening spaces beyond . . . . [T]he idea of the nation as family [and home] helps to secure the “naturalness” of social hierarchies *within* nations by associating them with the purported naturalness of the Western family: the patriarch with subordinate wife and children, all supposedly forming an organic unity with the same inherent interests . . . . The family metaphor enables a country to present two useful yet somewhat contradictory images of itself – the feminine home, the heartland, in need of defense, and the masculine state, aggressively defending the national hearth – that are seen as united under the common banner of the “family.” (Domosh 536)

This “gendering of nationalism” (536) promotes patriarchal social hierarchies within the nationalistic discourse; it also serves to naturalize a hetero-normative family dynamic for all of its citizenry to uphold.

As feminist cultural geographer Gillian Rose points out, this naturalization of the postwar family home as a forceful expression of white, hetero-normative, patriarchal family life has tended to “alienate [white, middle-class] socialist feminists” like Rich who view *home* as a



“major site of women’s oppression” in a Western capitalist system of unpaid domestic female labor (Rose 53, 54).<sup>7</sup> In this context, women “rarely claim or control space but instead are caught and confined by it” (Bondi and Davidson 21). Given the historical oppression of women in domestic spaces, “many women have had to leave home precisely in order to forge their own version of their identities” (Massey 1994 11). Chicana lesbian feminist writer Gloria Anzaldúa explains in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, for example, that given the patriarchal structure of Chicano culture, “I had to leave home so I could find myself, find my own intrinsic nature buried under the personality that had been imposed on me” (39). So too, Rich, a lesbian and a feminist, needs to reclaim an authentic self by exposing the naturalized gender and sexual hierarchies embedded in socially constructed patriarchal familial space.

In “Sources,” Rich also draws a connection between “unnatural” social constructs and “natural” landscape. Surveying her local New England countryside in “Sources,” she identifies more with the natural flora, the “multifoliate heal-all,” than with the constructed “forms” of house and barn (I.15-23). The juxtaposition of “wild” nature—plants and weeds—within a domesticated landscape of manmade structures and heavily tended farms reflects her interior struggle to thrive despite domestic prescriptions. Rich recognizes that her strength does not come from a sentimentalized physical landscape, but from what is inside her,

what has accrued from her experiences as a feminist. Using her feminist strength to break down the socially constructed walls of the family home, she commits a metaphorical act of rebellion against a larger system of nationalized (and naturalized) gender oppression:

And if my look becomes the bomb that rips  
the family home apart

is this betrayal, that the walls  
slice off, the staircase shows

torn-away above the street

.....

where the father walks up and down  
telling the child to *work, work*

*harder than anyone has worked before?*

—But I can't stop seeing like this

More and more I see like this everywhere. (XIV.1-15)

Feminism as both insightful vision and weapon against the supposed safety of patriarchal order becomes a recurring trope in *Your Native Land, Your Life*, as images of physical violence represent the means of transcending not only the confines of the white, middle-class domestic space, but also the cultural boundaries of national identity as familial bond.<sup>8</sup> Rich's feminist vision—what she calls her “womanly lens”—burns through this family/national identity façade in order to find a new non-nationalistic and non-patriarchal female-empowered view of *her* native land and *her* life.

Rich's retrospective feminist vision also gives her the strength to confront the psychological pain that she endured from her father's expectations that she renounce her female identity to become his longed-for son. As I will discuss in the next chapter, Louise Erdrich's *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* shares similar thematic concerns with Rich's daughter/son character in "Sources." Just as Erdrich creates a woman-man character of Sister Agnes/Father Damien, whose very existence questions the patriarchal authority of the Catholic Church, Rich's politics of location as a lesbian and a feminist challenges her father's authority over her childhood gender identity. Paradoxically, Rich's struggle to accept her own alternative sexual and gender identities despite her father's patriarchal expectations allows her to ultimately acknowledge his struggles as an assimilated Jew in mainstream U.S. culture:

For years I struggled with you: your categories, your theories, your will, the cruelty which came inextricable from your love. For years all the arguments I carried on in my head were with you. I saw myself, the eldest daughter raised as a son, taught to study but not to pray, taught to hold reading and writing sacred: the eldest daughter in a house with no son, she must overthrow the father, take what he taught her and use it against him. All this in a

castle of air, the floating world of the assimilated who know  
and deny they will always be aliens. (VII. 1-9)

Brodkin suggests that “intellectually pushy daughterhood was a temporary stage in life, even for Jews” in early postwar U.S. patriarchal culture (11). For Rich, her father’s expectation that she play the role of the intellectual son yet submit to his patriarchal authority as the submissive daughter represents the ongoing internal war she has with herself as a feminist. She embraces her father’s world of ideas only insofar as she draws on them to see the connections between her own gender oppression as a feminist raised in a traditional family home and her father’s racial oppression as an “alien” Jew within mainstream U.S. culture.

Rich’s marginalization within her family home—a feminist outsider enduring what she calls her father’s “verbal brutalities/borne thereafter like any burn or scar” (XIII.11-12)—reflects the violent marginalization of those who have been assaulted as outsiders within their *homeland*. These outsiders, like Rich’s Jewish father, who do not fit the mold of the nation’s dominant cultural identity, in some cases, become the embodiment of the cultural violence perpetrated against them. Rich’s decision to reject her father’s internalized racism against Jews and to embrace her once-exiled Jewish identity emphasizes what she defines in “Sources” as a “diaspora-driven” search for *home*, a need to safely ground herself to a *place* through a newfound sense of identity

(IX.3-4). As literary critic Maera Shreiber writes, “exile and displacement” figure prominently within “Jewish aesthetic production” (273). In “Sources,” Rich explores the socio-spatial themes often connected with the Jewish diaspora: cultural displacement, violent nationalism, and geographical exile. But by signifying her own and her father’s differing experiences of Jewish displacement within mainstream American culture, in particular—she longs to embrace her Jewish side while her father longs to erase it—Rich also refuses a too-easy representation of a monolithic “Jewish” experience.<sup>9</sup>

## II

Interweaving its sections on Jewish American assimilation with passages devoted to the predominantly white, Christian culture of Puritan New England, “Sources” posits the historical foundations of racial and cultural hegemony in the U.S. as put in place, in part, by those “persecuted” Puritans who knew “how to persecute” (X.12. 1-8). The poem traces the early colonists’ cultural violence against the Indigenous people of the area now known as New England as one of the historical “sources” of contemporary homogeneous nation-building tactics in the U.S., especially enforced dominant-culture assimilation. In this way, “Sources” shares thematic affinities with Native American scholar Ward Churchill’s argument that the mainstream denial of Anglo-settlement cultures’ genocidal practices toward Indigenous people has been “incorporated into the prevailing mythology” of the United

States (1-3). Like Rich, Churchill also draws comparisons between the Nazi Holocaust against Jews in Europe and to the Anglo-Christian American Holocaust against Indigenous people in the North America.<sup>10</sup>

Rich's *Native Land* represents these shaping influences by engaging with the violent patriarchal agenda of enforced dominant cultural and racial assimilation in the U.S in the context of Anglo-Christian colonization. In its Puritan passages, for example, the poem finds a relationship between late twentieth-century New England's predominantly homogeneous racial terrain — those "villages / white with rectitude and death" — and the historical dislocation of the region's Indigenous population from their land by white Christian settlers (X.1-2). Surveying the "upland" countryside, Rich sees the "farms / of invaders" and villages "built on stolen ground" (X.1-2, 4). She critiques the "law of history" that accords with the Puritans' religious belief that they were "destined" to own this land so that they "need never ponder difference" (X.7-8). Vine Deloria, Jr., writes of Western European colonization in the Americas: "Everything non-Christian and lacking the customs and attributes of Christian civilization was to be pushed from the inevitable path of progress" (78). Rich frames her reader's view of a culturally unified "New" England landscape with that history of Anglo-European racial and religious dominance. In doing so, the poem asks its reader to consider the unjust historical influences inherent in enforced dominant cultural

assimilation not only for Indigenous people but also for other marginalized groups who, like Rich's Jewish father, stand outside the white "social christian" center (V.9).

In an effort to disrupt this unified center—especially the idea a culturally homogeneous space—Rich carefully never refers to her native land as either the "United States" or "America." (As I noted earlier, she refers to her childhood identity only once as "American" to challenge its socially constructed connotations during the war). She instead refers to the geographical location that she inhabits as "North America." This continental reference serves to destabilize, or denaturalize, what Lefebvre would call the "consistent 'reality' endowed to the 'unnatural' borders of nations" (1991: 110). Although the term North America similarly reinforces the mapping out of territorial borders, I suggest that Rich's focus in "Sources" is on dismantling the transparent illusion of nations. Not unaware of finding her "themes cut out for [her]," she confines herself to using U.S. cultural constructs of space and place even as she interrogates them as such ("North American Time" 1.6).

To disrupt a transparent view of New England as a geographically and culturally unified *region*, for example, Rich reconnects its landscape to the vast northeastern terrain that once belonged to diverse tribes of Indigenous people. She explicitly names the Mohawk and Wampanoag who "knew this place" differently. Rich asks,

is the region still trying to speak with them

is this light a language  
the shudder of this aspen-grove a way

of sending messages  
the white mind barely intercepts? (XII.1-10)

These lines suggest that one's cultural context dictates one's perception of place. The ability to decipher "the shudder" of an "aspen-grove" reveals this distinction of cultural difference between the Indigenous people of what is now known as the Northeastern United States and Southeastern Canada and the present-day white settlement culture that dominates these bordered areas. "Sources" asks its non-Native reader to consider that underneath the continuation of oppressive Western colonial nation-building practices in North America—the creation of borders and the commercial exploitation of natural resources—the land itself has a voice that "speaks" differently to its Indigenous inhabitants.

By invoking the historical colonization of the New England region, Rich not only considers how the Puritans' settlement practices affected the area's Indigenous people but also its native ecology. Environmental historian William Cronon suggests that "although we tend to associate ecological changes primarily with the cities and factories of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" in the U.S., it should be understood "that changes with similar roots took place just as profoundly in the farms and countrysides of the colonial period" (170). The English colonialists bounded the land with fences, deforested land



so livestock could graze pastures, and allowed the unchecked killing of wildlife which led to the rapid endangerment of certain indigenous species now extinct from the region. These exploitative “economic relations of production” proved both “ecologically destructive” and antithetical to Indigenous people’s way of life and their place-based spiritual practices (Cronon 169).

Rich defines New England’s white, Christian settlement culture as based on imperial conquest with damaging sociological *and* ecological effects. In doing so, “Sources” undermines the power of historical narratives about New England as a region somehow belonging to the colonists—as if its existence were created, as Rich puts it, “under god’s eye” for Anglo-European colonization (XI. 12).<sup>11</sup> “A specious concreteness in labeling people as belonging to one geographically finite community or another,” writes Lawrence Buell, “persists as an ethnological illusion or demographic artifact” in the U.S. and “categories like ‘Texan’ or ‘New Englander’ are apt to evoke a much more unitary gestalt than the facts warrant” (2001: 65). Rich’s attempt to conjure discursively the early settler’s view of “New” England as their own sacredly ordained space fueled by a sense of righteousness draws ideological parallels between early U.S. colonialism and more recent forms of xenophobic place-attachment and nation building. (XI.1-4). Rich makes clear, for example, that a homogeneous national identity in the form of twentieth-century dominant cultural assimilation, which

forced her Jewish father to assimilate into the mainstream, white, Christian culture of the early postwar period, is historically rooted in patriarchal and racist paradigms set in motion by Anglo-Christian colonization centuries ago.

Rich's poem dismantles, too, the social hegemony implicit in the creation of nation states outside of the United States. "Sources" draws a connection, for example, between the oppressed Puritans creating New England based on a biblical belief in the "promised land" and the dream of Jewish Zionism in Palestine after World War One. Of the *halutzot*, Jewish women who migrated from Europe and the U.S. to settle into agricultural communal living in Palestine between the two world wars, Rich writes,

I think of the women who sailed to Palestine  
years before I was born—

*halutzot*, pioneers  
believing in a new life  
.....

wanting equality in the promised land

carrying the broken promises  
of Zionism in their hearts. (XIX.7-16)

Because Zionism stemmed, in part, from a "desire for a new life and vocation through the return to the soil," the *halutzot* were specifically "motivated to improve their [gender] status" by looking for gender equality in the communal agricultural living of the *kibbutz* (Glass 72). For Jewish women, the "triple oppression of gender, nationality, and

class” became a “substantial ‘push’ factor in their desire to leave the U.S for this ‘promised land’” (65). The dream of Zionism in Jewish Palestine not only seduced the halutzot but also thousands of Jewish American men, women, and families to leave behind the industrialized urban center Jewish neighborhoods of the United States for a pastoral homeland in Palestine (70). Zionism thus embraced “various nuances of rebuilding the Jewish nation, of being part of the historical process of a people returning to its land” and falls under “the general headings of nationalism and patriotism” (66). However, as Rich’s poem signals, the subsequent creation of a post-WWII nation state of Israel also dislocated thousands of Palestinian people from *their* native land.

For Rich, these two “promised land” places—Puritan New England and Zionist Palestine—clearly emphasize how the historical formation of nations or homelands based on religious fundamentalism, dreams of cultural unity, or rebellion against forms of persecution often lead to the dislocation of or violence against those who do not fit its ideological mold. Such forms of nation building become, as Rich puts it, “the pattern” that leads to “a different pattern / terrible, threadbare / strained familiar ongoing” (XVIII.22-25). While “Sources” does not simply condemn the Christian Puritans or the Jewish Zionists for their beliefs, here, as elsewhere in *Native Land*, Rich demands historical “accountability” for how their beliefs have been translated into dangerous ideological and violent outcomes in the formation of

exclusive nation states (III.10-12). For Rich especially, the fight over the Jewish holy land and spiritual center in the Middle East—Jerusalem—represents a fraught socio-spatial history about which she, as a politically aware Jew, cannot find any easy resolution.

Then, too, Rich turns her demand for socio-spatial accountability inward as she examines the conflicting ideological politics of place that have shaped her personal identity as a present-day Jewish activist attracted to the historical promised land of white, Christian Puritanism: New England. “Sources” reveals Rich’s deep ambivalence about feeling politically repelled yet temperamentally drawn to New England, despite its history of colonial violence. She questions these contradictions when she writes,

Why has my imagination stayed  
northeast with the ones who stayed

Are there spirits within me, diaspora-driven  
that wanted to lodge somewhere

hooked into the “New” Englanders who hung on  
here in this stringent space

believing their Biblical language  
their harping on righteousness? (IX. 1-8)

Rich’s devotion in “Sources,” and in much of her writing, to political and moral themes reflects her own Puritan-like principled pursuit of righteousness. The early settlers’ ability to endure “each winter so mean” with their “endless purifications of the self” (IX.11-14) parallel Rich’s own desire to psychically “purify” herself—both of the psychic

pain of childhood trauma at the hands of her father and the spiritual pain of being a “diaspora-driven” Jew in mainstream American culture—by writing about social injustice for others.<sup>12</sup> What some critics view as Rich’s rigid fixation on literary activism, here she identifies as an ethical belief in social justice. This belief helps her to endure the coldness of critical attacks on her politics just as the Puritan’s used their Biblical beliefs to endure the harsh New England winters.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, Rich appears not only temperamentally but also aesthetically drawn to the austerity of the classic New England colonial village architecture with its pristine rural areas. Through the formal aspects of the “Sources” poems, she reveals this preference for Puritan asceticism: twenty-two concisely written prose and verse passages, separated by the tidy arrangement of numbers and blank white spaces corresponds to the orderliness of Puritan-descended villages dotting the snow-covered New England landscape. This literary attraction to the Puritan aesthetic, despite her ethical condemnation of the white colonialist’s settlement practices, represents one of many spatial contradictions of Rich’s *Native Land*.

These political and aesthetic contradictions get only partially resolved in *Part II: North American Time*, when she writes: “It doesn’t matter what you think./Words are found responsible/all you can do is choose them/or choose/to remain silent” (“North American” IV.1-5). Ultimately, Rich recognizes that having contradictory choices about

which themes to emphasize in her literary work is based on her own “verbal privilege” as a white, middle-class, educated writer in “a country/where poets don’t go to jail/ for being poets/but for being dark-skinned, female, poor” (II.1-17; VII. 1-6). As an activist poet, she makes a conscious decision “to speak” out against injustice for marginalized others who cannot speak for themselves despite, or even as a result of, her own personal privileges or temperamental affinities (IX.17).

### III

#### **Toward an Ecofeminist Politics of Location**

In the first two poems of *Part II*—“For the Record” and “North American Time”—Rich turns her attention more specifically to American imperialism and nation-building practices in the form of land exploitation and environmental racism, emphasizing the environmental justice underpinnings of her *Native Land* collection. Environmental justice advocates highlight the eco-cultural concerns of environmental racism, emphasizing ongoing toxic polluting practices and environmental laws designed to privilege white middle- and ruling-class neighborhoods and businesses while they disadvantage poor and working-class whites and communities of color. In “North American Time,” Rich’s reference to “toxic swamps” and “testing grounds” alludes to the U.S. governmental and corporate practices of using Indigenous

people's reservation land for atomic testing, uranium mining, and radioactive toxic dumping.

These practices to which Rich refers, especially the ongoing mining and dumping, began in earnest during the atomic bomb era. Tied specifically to the U.S.'s national and imperial interests around the world and at home (including, among other things, energy superiority), the development and use of the atomic bomb allowed the U.S. government to defeat Japan and end WWII. Its pro-American image abroad as a strong, vital nation that ended the world war allowed the U.S. to fortify its national boundaries at home and to expand its capitalist interests abroad. As "North American Time" alludes to, the development of the atomic bomb required the targeting of people of color in the U.S. and elsewhere. Testing and dumping sites in poor communities and Indigenous reservations in the Southwestern United States (and later in the South Pacific Islands like Bikini) resulted in ongoing detrimental health issues for those communities' supposedly "dispensable" inhabitants.

Edwardo Lao Rhodes' *Environmental Justice in America* points out that these polluting practices continued well into the late twentieth century. "Between 1990-1993, of more than 22 community grant requests to study the feasibility of locating a nuclear waste facility within a locale, 16 came from Indian reservations" (5). Rhodes' argues that when "faced with few economic alternatives and not fully aware of

the assumed risks involved,” communities of color have been forced historically to undertake “environmentally hazardous activities” at their own peril. Certainly this is true of the overrepresentation of Latino/a farmworkers working in pesticide-laden agricultural fields and “Native American communities’ ‘choice’ of potentially high-risk environmental activities like nuclear storage” (7) As Hansberry, Viramontes, and Rich show, poor communities of color, given their lack of economic resources and political power, are often, as Rhodes says, “put at a tremendous disadvantage in deciding where to live and work” (6).

Within the many grass-roots environmental justice organizations that have formed since the 1980’s, many of the leading members are people of color, especially women, who come from affected areas of the country and targeted communities. These “victims” are now, as Robert Bullard puts it, “launching frontal assaults on polluting industries and decision makers who view their communities as expendable” (xv). Rich joins this assault on decision-makers by demanding accountability from her *reader* for the social and environmental injustices that occur in *your* native land. She writes,

if here or there a house  
 filled up with backed-up raw sewage  
 or poisoned those who lived there  
 with slow fumes, over years  
 the houses were not at war  
 nor did the tinned up buildings

intend to refuse shelter  
 to the homeless women and roaming children  
 they had no policy to keep them roaming



or dying, no, the cities were not the problem  
 the bridges were non-partisan  
 .....

the trees didn't volunteer to be cut into boards  
 nor the thorns for tearing flesh  
 ("For the Record" 1-15)

Rich's "poetry of testimony to lives lived on the margins—especially those marked by dislocation and violence—has attempted to be politically instrumental, spurring action . . . among her readers" (Jacobs 727). The poet demands that her reader see how the poisonous fumes, barbed wire fences, and sewage-filled buildings signify, as Soja would put it, the politics of oppressive environmental and socio-spatial practices. Asserting a distinctly ecofeminist viewpoint, too, Rich's poetry sees *both* people (displaced "homeless women") *and* nature (trees "cut into boards") as similar victims of such practices (1989: 4). Demanding that you "look around at all of it" and "ask where you were" (33-35), Rich challenges her reader. She protests that "the trees didn't volunteer to be cut into boards," any more than the "illiterate, big-bellied/Women" asked to be made homeless by a "signature" stamped "on the orders" of "building plans" for gentrification ("For The Record" 18-36). Rich wants her reader to see these systemic political threads of domination, these sources of environmental injustice, by making that which is invisible, visible.

Similarly, in *Sources*, Rich references the "drowned towns of the Quabbin," to make visible another "invisible" environment. In this case,

the Quabbin Reservoir in Western Massachusetts; filled in 1939, it became the largest man-made drinking water reservoir in the world. As one environmental researcher writes,

Beneath its pristine waters, and among the trees of the surrounding protected watershed lie the stories of the 2500 residents, 1100 buildings and 7500 graves that were moved when [the] lands of the Swift River Valley were taken by eminent domain to create the Quabbin (Harlow).

By referring to this drowned place within the fabled New England landscape, Rich performs an act of “imaginative environmental restoration” (Buell 78). Bioregionalist Freeman House writes that “the story a place has to tell is an absence so large in our [i.e. U.S. settlement] culture as to be outside our range of vision. It is invisible like the air is invisible” (as quoted in Buell 2001: 78).<sup>14</sup> Rich brings awareness of these hidden towns of New England to call attention to invisible place narratives—and as symbol of the social and environmental injustices often overlooked or embedded in the national landscape. Drowning, too, becomes a metaphor for dominant cultural assimilation: submerging one’s cultural affiliations in order to feel “in place” in the dominant culture of the U.S.

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In the period in which she was writing the poems that would eventually become the *Native Land* collection, Rich's two complementary essays, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980) and "Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity" (1982), elaborate her violent break with her traditional upbringing. In these prose pieces, Rich details more specifically her struggle to embrace her identity as a Jewish lesbian. By no longer trying to fit the dominant cultural American mold of gentile (her mother's side) or heterosexual (a socially imposed "compulsory" sexual identity), Rich embraces her religious and sexual differences rather than hides from them. In this way, Rich's politics of location in both poetry and prose in the 1980's shares affinities with the feminist spatial imagination of Anzaldúa's *mestiza consciousness* and bell hooks' *radical marginality*. These feminist writers address, in their own ways, what Soja refers to as thirdspatial "other' spaces," (1996: 117) and Lefebvre calls "differential spaces" (1991: 52). The alternative spatial images in their works embody sites of heterogeneity and articulate struggle against dominant cultural and nation-based concepts of identity. As hooks reminds us, occupying "marginality as position and place of resistance" allows feminists to provide an alternative view of the dominant culture (1990: 150).

Identifying herself as a Jewish lesbian feminist writing her *Native Land* collection during the conservative Reagan-era of the 1980's, Rich

finds emotional identification with those who have been historically marginalized or displaced by political power. Yet she also expresses a self-consciousness “as close to self-accusation as to self-awareness” about having a racially privileged voice in a colonized country where this “context is never given” (Blackford 16; Rich 1986: VII. 9). What Rich refers to as her “contradictions,” Claire Keyes calls her “dilemma of power” (4). Ruth Frankenburg similarly points out that “as much as white women are located in—and speak from—physical environments shaped by race, [they] are also located in, and perceive environments by means of, a set of discourses on race, culture, and society whose history spans this century and, beyond it, the broader sweep of Western expansion and colonialism” (2). Throughout the 1980’s, Rich’s work addresses other white Western feminists like herself who, while historically marginalized as women, also unintentionally “marginalize others” because even their “‘women’s cultures’ are rooted in some Western tradition” (“Notes” 219).

*Because* of her experience with both privilege and marginalization, Rich feels a responsibility to engage with the historical influences of Western colonial paradigms in her life and others'. Especially she believes in standing with those who have been oppressed by those paradigms ("North American" VIII.8). *Your Native Land, Your Life* extends this critique beyond the cultural implications of Western traditions to include ecological concerns. In doing so, the collection

shares the ecofeminist philosophy that “the liberation of women and marginalized groups cannot be achieved in isolation, but only as part of a larger struggle for the preservation of life on this planet” (Mies and Shiva 16).

With its metaphorical alignment “to the breath of [the] planet,” *Your Native Land, Your Life* expresses an ecofeminist consciousness in postwar U.S. women’s literature, one that perceives the relativity of cultural difference *and* geographical location in relationship to the formation of nations and their dominant cultural practices. The metaphor of “location” itself in this collection is also relative. Rich’s ability to locate even her father as one who embodies both socio-spatial power (as a white heterosexual male in the patriarchal space of the family home) and alienation (as an assimilated Jew) argues that a person’s political location within the context of an “American” identity should be read outside the confines of rigid nationalistic borders. By imagining both the center and the reverberating margins on a map of her “home,” Rich locates herself and others within a geography of difference, one that recognizes concepts of space, place, gender, race, and nation as political, dialectical, heterogeneous, and capable of change.

## Chapter Four

### **Erdrich's *Last Report*: Gender, Religion and the Transformative Power of Place**

The region has conspired with itself  
to bring her north, to dump her from  
her house into the current where she  
was rescued and where she changed  
clothes with the priest.

—*The Last Report on the  
Miracles at Little No Horse*

In this final chapter, I turn to the cross-dressing Agnes/Father Damien in Louise Erdrich's *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001) to argue that Agnes's transformations into a female-male priest and a practitioner of Anishinaabeg beliefs challenge the gender and religious boundaries of Western culture and the Catholic Church. Specifically, I show how these transformations reveal the spatial dimensions of gender in Western culture, interrogate the place of the Catholic Church on the Ojibwe reservation, critique the imposed geographical boundaries of the reservation, and emphasize the sacred, transformative power of place in Anishinaabeg culture.<sup>1</sup>

Drawing on the work of feminist geographers Doreen Massey and Gillian Rose, the chapter begins by arguing that Agnes's inhibited movements as female and her subsequent spatial privilege as a white male expose gender as a socio-spatial construct of inequality within traditional Western culture. The acceptance Agnes receives as a "man-acting-woman" (232) on the Ojibwe reservation highlights this inequality in Western culture while it emphasizes Massey's contention

that different cultural spaces produce subjective gender norms, an idea that upends those arguments which naturalize gendered behavior.

The discussion then turns to the influence of Ojibwe oral and cultural traditions in Erdrich's novel, including the transformative power of place in traditional storytelling, and stresses Erdrich's representation of "a tribal view of the world" in which "people and place are inseparable" (Erdrich 1985:1). I maintain that Agnes's gender and spiritual transformations occur in sacred Ojibwe places—the river, the sweat lodge, the woods, and Spirit Island—revising the dominant cultural view that the reservation is an entirely colonized space. On the contrary, Erdrich's fictional Little No Horse reservation represents a range of open spaces, including hybrid religious beliefs, multiple gender roles, and rivers and woods endowed with spiritual power. These Ojibwe spaces and places contest the system of exploitation that created the Native American reservation in the first place. They refute the colonizer's insistence on maps and borders, their seizing of sacred Native lands, and their supposed religious domination of Ojibwe people.

In bringing together these Western feminist and Native viewpoints, my reading of *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* follows Erdrich's example. Her presentation of Father Damien embodies a mixture of Western feminist, traditional Ojibwe, and Christian symbolism. This multiplicity signifies a recognizable feminist strategy for destabilizing white, Western patriarchal notions of gender

while it simultaneously defies colonialism by rejecting Western Christian concepts of purity, division, and hierarchy. Similar to Gloria Anzaldúa's *mestiza consciousness*—a political position meant to disorder rigid dichotomies of space, place, and identity—Damien's gender and religious plurality disrupts traditional Western dualisms (male versus female, Christian versus pagan, on the reservation versus off). Historically enforced by Christian missionaries on Ojibwe and other tribal reservations, this dualistic thinking altered Native people's traditional acceptance of multiple gender identities and, invoking Papal Law, refused their place-based ceremonial practices. Damien's absorption of multiple worldviews mirrors a cultural survival strategy used by Native people, including Ojibwe people, early on in reservation life as well as today.

## I

### **Leaving the Convent or Kicking the (Female) Habit**

Western culture marks the body as a gendered subject through social power structures—medical, legal, religious—which enforce hetero-normative values. Recognition of the gendered subject depends on a male/female dualism, any deviation from which gets labeled as abnormal or transgressive. Gender becomes further naturalized through a set of socially produced corporeal signals and spatial activities. As Henri Lefebvre argues, “social space ‘incorporates’ social actions” (33). That is, social space gets organized materially, perceived linguistically,



and performed in public to reify mainstream gender norms. For feminist geographers like Massey and Rose, the social hierarchies that produce gendered spaces in Western culture ultimately serve a hetero-normative patriarchal social order. Gendered spaces both sanctified (the Catholic Church) and quotidian (separate public restrooms) shape people's self-perceptions and their spatial choices.

In *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, the all-female Catholic convent represents a socio-religious space that specifically enforces the natural-seeming coherence of gender difference in Western culture. Once Agnes leaves the convent and changes her identity from female to male, we see how the social perception of gender impacts her spatial experiences. Almost immediately after donning the dead Father Damien's robe, Agnes's new male disguise offers her a radically improved form of spatial agency. Damien uses a larger "stride" in walking as a priest and notes how people allow him "more privacy" than he had previously enjoyed as a nun (74, 62).<sup>2</sup> Freed from the restrictive gender constraints imposed on women's bodies and behaviors in the Catholic Church and in early twentieth-century white patriarchal culture, Agnes as Father Damien quite simply takes up more *space*.

Similar to postmodern feminists like Judith Butler who critique gender as a performative social construction in Western culture, feminist geographers agree that gender is a social performance, but they emphasize its *geographical* dimensions.<sup>3</sup> Massey, for instance, finds a

significant “connection of space and place with gender and the construction of gender relations” (1994: 2). In Erdrich’s novel, the priesthood represents a bastion of celibate white male space that Agnes, through performing her male disguise, calls attention to as unfairly gendered because of its disproportionate male privilege within the Catholic Church. Feminist geographers also emphasize the unequal *degree* of physical space afforded to those recognized as either women or men. Rose explains:

Being defined as a woman [in Western culture] is likely to entail feeling confined in and constrained by space. Being a woman means living largely according to a geographical imagination that is masculinist in nature, that privileges and makes room for male subjects to express and impose themselves in and on their environs. . . . [In contrast] women do not often gesture and stride, stretch and push to the limits of our physical capabilities. (1993: 44)

While weakened by its lack of race and class distinctions—Chicana migrant farmworkers, for instance, are daily pushed beyond their physical boundaries through labor—Rose’s argument highlights the *corporeal* construction of gender and space in traditional Western culture. That is, the gendered body both influences and is influenced by social hierarchies of space and place (Rose 48). In the context of traditional Anglo-American culture, Chicana farmworkers become, as I

have shown in Chapter Two, not just limited by but also erased by these socio-spatial hierarchies.

If we consider Rose's argument in light of Agnes's changing gender identity, these hierarchies become obvious. Agnes experiences her gendered body in 1912, a time in which all women, in varying degrees, did not enjoy the same social and physical freedoms as white men. Even in her role as the hardworking farm woman Agnes Dewitt, for instance, her home tasks reflect traditional, circumscribed, domestic women's work: she cooks, cleans, sews, and kills chickens (18). But as Agnes's public gender changes, so too does the amount of social and physical space she feels free to inhabit. In her list of "Rules to Assist in [her] Transformation," she reminds her male self to "make requests in the form of orders" and to "swing arms" while walking (74).

Experiencing a corporeal sense of self as more privileged to inhabit expanses of space, Damien travels to more remote areas of the reservation for his missionary work than do the nuns. This spatial expansion extends to social freedom as well. "As Agnes she'd always felt too inhibited to question men. . . . As a man, she found that Father Damien was free to pursue all questions with frankness and ease" (62). Perfecting her male act, Agnes fools at least the white characters in Erdrich's novel: the nuns and priests culturally trained to essentialize gender as a spatial performance even as they believe it is natural, God-given behavior.

Both Massey and Rose critique such gender essentialism in traditional Western culture by articulating not only how gender performance incorporates spatial activities and consequences but also how different “local-cultural spaces/places” define gender in relative terms (Massey 1994: 178). Massey gives the example: “What it means to be masculine in the Fens is not the same as in Lancashire” (178). We can trace this cultural-spatial connection throughout Agnes’s narrative. When she flees from the convent to Bernt’s farm, her ability to travel across space signals her suppressed femininity: her breasts are “bound tight to her chest with strips of cloth” (13). Agnes’s spatial mobility becomes, in Bernt’s masculine view, an eroticized form of female gender transgression. “He thought at first she must be a loose woman, fleeing a brothel . . . . Or escaping a bad marriage” (13). Reflecting the attitudes of early twentieth-century Anglo-patriarchal culture, Bernt contextualizes Agnes’s spatial mobility as either sexually deviant or dictated by her relationship to a man. Erdrich uses Agnes’s *movement* through space and the gendered expectations she encounters along the way to demonstrate the hierarchy of masculine/feminine behavior in Western culture.

As evidenced in the previous three chapters, the trope of women crossing various boundaries of place, space, and identity recurs as a means of feminist escape in mid-to-late twentieth-century women’s literature. For it offers a way of transgressing the confines of traditional

gender, race, class, and sexuality norms. “The mobility of women,” writes Massey, has historically “pose[d] a threat to a settled patriarchal order” (1994: 11). In Erdrich’s novel, certainly, Agnes’s spatial mobility equals a threatening form of gender mobility: she leaves her celibate life as Sister Cecilia in the convent to enjoy an out-of-wedlock sexual affair with Bernt. In response to Agnes’s ability to transgress social norms of feminine respectability, Bernt becomes aroused; he gets erotic pleasure from her bound breasts and likens her naked piano playing to “something for which he would have had to pay a whore in Fargo” (21). But he soon attempts to reassert patriarchal order. He wants to contain Agnes’s transgressive behavior within the domestic space of the heterosexual family home by marrying her. Bernt’s wish to impose a traditional marriage on the non-traditional sexual relationship he enjoys with Agnes (to make her no longer his “whore” but his wife) represents a fitting example of what Massey would call the “masculine desire” in Western patriarchal culture to fix women in stable identities, a longing that “may be tied in with a desire to fix space and place” (11). Bernt quite literally wants to put Agnes in her *place* as a married woman. To reinforce the point, Erdrich shows that Father Gregory later has the identical matrimonial response to his love affair with Agnes, insisting she leave the priesthood and become his dutiful wife. In Erdrich’s novel, Agnes’s two lovers—both white males—uphold the heterosexual norms of patriarchal Western tradition. Significantly, as I

will discuss later, Agnes finds an alternative cultural context for her change into a male priest through the Ojibwe people's acceptance of gender variance and spiritual metamorphosis.

Given the constraints of her female gender identity before her male transformation, Agnes's "curious nature led her down constant pathways" (38) looking for ways to escape spatial restrictions. After Bernt's death, her grief and discontent with being confined alone on the farm become so maddening that she howls and "savagely [tears] at the wallpaper of her bedroom" in a scene reminiscent of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892). This late-nineteenth-century feminist tale, published approximately two decades before Agnes's narrative begins, tells the story of a woman confined to her room for mental health reasons by her physician husband. The extreme confinement illustrates mainstream nineteenth-century patriarchal attitudes about women's limited mental powers and also demonstrates how their social mobility was controlled through inhibiting their *spatial* mobility. Erdrich alludes to this famous literary image of female confinement to articulate how trapped Agnes feels by Western gender norms.

When Agnes arrives as Father Damien on the Little No Horse reservation, however, the Ojibwe residents provide a cultural space for her gender transformation that operates outside of a male/female dualism and challenges the hetero-normative values it reinforces.

Unlike the shock (not to mention the relief that he isn't homosexual) Father Gregory experiences when he discovers that Damien is biologically female, Nanapush, who often expresses the traditional Ojibwe viewpoint of Erdrich's novel, refers to the priest's cross-dressing nonchalantly. "So you're not a woman-acting man, you're a man-acting woman," he says to Damien while making a clever chess move (232). "We don't get so many of those lately," the Ojibwe elder remarks. "Between us, Margaret and me, we couldn't think of more than a couple" (232). Agnes realizes that "this moment, so shattering to her, wasn't of like importance to Nanapush" (232). In fact, most of the Ojibwe residents don't seem to mind whether Damien is "a man priest or a woman priest" (230). Their easy acceptance of the priest's male/female identity highlights an approval of gender variance in Ojibwe culture which differs radically from the rigid gender determinism of Western and Catholic cultures.

Deirdre Keenan, a non-Native scholar who has consulted with a number of Ojibwe and Potawatomi tribal members about gender variance in traditional Anishinaabeg culture, argues that Erdrich's Ojibwe characters recognize Damien as "Two-Spirit" (3). This term used in some Native American and First Nations cultures describes a person who occupies two (and sometimes three and four) genders simultaneously, as in "man-acting-woman" or "woman-acting-man," though it cannot be adequately translated into English from Native

languages (Keenan 3).<sup>4</sup> In *Two-Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality* (1997) Sabine Lang, a non-Native scholar who has written extensively on gender roles in Native American cultures based, in part, on comprehensive interviews with Native people from numerous tribes, agrees that translating Two-Spirit loses its fundamental meaning, especially because it inadvertently suggests gender binaries in English. But, like Keenan, Lang suggests that “referring to two-spirit people in Native American languages usually indicates that they are seen as combining the masculine and the feminine” (103). Lang explains:

Two-spirit statuses and roles reflect worldviews found widely in Native American cultures, which appreciate and recognize ambivalence and change both in individuals and in the world at large, as becomes apparent in origin stories, stories relating to the Trickster Cycle, and many other stories from different tribes . . . The fact that two-spirit females and males are seen as a mixture of the masculine and the feminine, and not something completely different from both, does not imply that they are not seen as separate genders different from both man and woman. On the contrary, two-spirit males and females are seen as genders of their own regardless of whether their status and roles may be largely a combination of the culturally defined



women's and men's, and in some cases, special roles appropriate to them because of their dual nature. (103)

Many traditional Indigenous cultures, including Anishinaabeg culture, once accepted and, at times, honored and revered this gender-variant tradition (Keenan 3). However, first suppressed by European colonialism and the Christian missionary influence, this traditional acceptance of gender variance was further sublimated by sex-gender dichotomies that dominated mainstream U.S. culture in the twentieth century. As Keenan argues persuasively, even though Damien is a white missionary, the Ojibwe characters of Erdrich's novel recognize his Two-Spirit status because they have a cultural "understanding of gender variance and familiar categories to absorb various identities" (6). Locating Damien within the Two-Spirit tradition, suggests Keenan, "helps to recuperate Native American understandings of gender identity formation and the transformative potential of these traditions" (4) outside of Western heterosexual gender roles, especially those enforced by the Catholic Church.

To add to Keenan's argument, I think it is also important to understand Damien's male-female identity as expressing the spiritual power of gender metamorphosis in traditional Anishinaabeg culture. Prior to the missionaries' suppression of their tribal beliefs, especially through the culturally devastating boarding school experience, the Ojibwe viewed gender transformation in relationship to spiritual

awakening. In the puberty vision quest, for example, “girls as well as boys needed the help of the Manitos” and “girls often conducted the long fast and received powerful visions” (Vecsey 1983: 124). Oftentimes a child’s gender identity or gender role was assigned or reassigned after birth once a child showed particular gender affinities or preferences. “There were Ojibwa women who became respected curers” and others who became warriors and leaders through vision quests (Vecsey 125). Similarly, Agnes experiences a form of spiritual awakening in the flood that leads her to discover the priesthood as her true vocation. In response to Father Gregory’s insistence that “a woman cannot be a priest,” Agnes “for this moment, exist[s] only in a spirit” when she replies, “I am a priest. . . . This is what I do” (*Last Report* 206). She becomes a man in order to answer her spiritual calling as a priest, and as Nanapush sees it, Father Damien’s “spirits must be powerful” to require him to do so (232). For the traditional elder Nanapush, Agnes’s ability to transform into a man-acting-woman indicates the influence of the manitos or “spirits” on Agnes’s gender identity rather than a religious affront to the norms upheld by the Catholic Church.

Contrasting the gender equality and gender variance found in traditional Anishinaabeg culture against the gender inequality and rigid dualism of Western culture and the Catholic Church, Erdrich’s novel illustrates what Massey calls the “variable construction of gender relations in different local/cultural spaces/places” (1994: 178). Or, as

Gloria Anzaldúa puts it, “culture forms our beliefs” (1987: 38). *The Last Report on the Miracles of Little No Horse* undermines those arguments and beliefs which rely on seemingly natural characteristics to differentiate women’s and men’s social places in Western tradition. In Erdrich’s novel, Agnes’s male-female gender identity exists in a place-based spiritual realm outside of such hierarchical gender norms. By transgressing the traditional gender boundaries of Western culture and the Catholic Church, Agnes finds a home as a man-woman among the Ojibwe people until her death.

## II

### **Transfiguring Agnes through the Sacred Power of Place**

During the early reservation period of the late-nineteenth century, storytelling and oral tradition, which have always been important in Native cultures, became a form of passive resistance to the Catholic Church and its mission of religious and dominant cultural assimilation for Native people. Erdrich, an enrolled member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Ojibwe Indians of northern North Dakota, emphasizes this storytelling tradition in Agnes’s narrative, in particular, drawing on elements of Ojibwe oral tradition in her *Last Report*, especially the spiritually transformative power of place.<sup>5</sup> “The four natural elements—earth, water, air, and fire” often appear “as one of the organizing principles for the themes within [Erdrich’s] writing,” argues David

McNab, which “comprise the essence of spiritual being for aboriginal people,” including the Anishinabeg (173).

In *The Last Report*, water becomes a key element in organizing Father Damien’s narrative: the Red River flood begins his new life as a young priest and Matchimanito Lake surrounding Spirit Island (where as an elderly priest he plans his death-by-drowning) ends it. The centrality of water to Agnes’s narrative represents the centrality of rivers, lakes and streams to traditional Anishinaabeg culture, from the Ojibwe’s reliance on wild rice lakes as a primary food source (LaDuke 167) to stories of the Underwater Manito’s ability to influence the weather and the availability of land and sea animals for hunting (Vecsey 1983: 74). Ojibwe activist Winona LaDuke writes that historically, “the Anishinaabeg moved over rivers, streams, and lakes to the Great Lakes region, where today a hundred or more reservations and reserves on both sides of the U.S.-Canadian border mark Anishinaabe Akiing, the land of the people” (168). As Father Damien moves toward the land of the Ojibwe—the fictional Little No Horse reservation—Erdrich describes *The Transfiguration of Agnes* as beginning “with that flow of water” (11).

Erdrich conflates this symbolic element of Anishinaabeg oral tradition with Christian Biblical symbolism to represent the cultural hybridity used by the Ojibwe to avoid complete assimilation into the dominant Christian culture. As I will return to in a moment, the flood water imagery of Agnes’s transformation refers to the Ojibwe Creation

Story. Yet Erdrich's use of the term "Transfiguration" at the start of Agnes's journey toward gender transformation also suggests a Biblical allusion to the *Transfiguration of Jesus Christ* in which Christ sheds his human form and reveals himself as the Son of God on a mountaintop before three of his apostles (Mark 9:2-9).<sup>6</sup> Agnes's subsequent gender transformation after a massive flood on the Red River similarly points to the Book of Genesis in which the Christian God creates a flood to eradicate evil from the human world. Leaving a female-male priest in its wake, however, Erdrich's flood washes away the hetero-normative gender binaries reified by Christ's singular male identity and God's insistence in the Book of Genesis that Noah save one male and one female animal of each species from the flood. In Erdrich's flood, Agnes becomes a man, but her "womanness" always remains "crouched dark with her" (209). Erdrich refigures these Biblical stories—the flood and the Transfiguration of Christ—to create a male-female priest who defies the traditional gender boundaries of the Catholic Church.

When read in relationship to the Ojibwe Creation Story, Agnes's transformation in the flood asserts a traditional Ojibwe worldview that defies Western, Christian concepts of gender and religion.<sup>7</sup> In the Ojibwe Creation Story, of which there are countless variations with similar elements, Nanabozho, a trickster figure and powerful culture hero for the Ojibwe, prevails over a cataclysmic flood caused by the Underwater Manito who controls the water (Vecsey 1983: 77).<sup>8</sup> Part of

the flood's significance in the Creation Story includes its relationship not only to nature's destructive powers (the Underwater Manito tries to drown Nanabozho) but also its connection to regenerative, transformative properties. Nanabozho creates a new world as a result of this flood. In traditional Anishinaabeg culture, the co-existence of destruction and creation indicates the contradictory forces inherent in all of nature, including the creation of human life (78).

As with the Creation Story, the flood figures prominently in Agnes's narrative as a transformative force of nature. At the start of Agnes's gender transformation, the flood waters give birth to her new embodied spirit as Father Damien just as her fluid "rocking between genders" (78) represents the quality of water itself. Christopher Vecsey, a non-Native historian of traditional Ojibwe culture, reminds us, "any concept of impersonal 'natural' forces is totally foreign to Ojibwa thought" (1988: 82).<sup>9</sup> Likewise, Vecsey, interpreting the Creation Story as reflecting the traditional Ojibwe worldview, points out that the "ability to change" one's identity as Nanabozho does—he appears in various disguises and transforms the landscape around him—often suggests spiritual power (1988: 83). Like Nanabozho, Damien becomes a trickster figure capable of clever disguise *and* spiritual metamorphosis. As Nanapush (also a trickster figure whose name derives from Nanabohzo) says to Damien: "You've been tricking everybody!" (232). Erdrich, too, "tricks" her Euro-American readership

from relying too heavily on its own cultural references to contextualize Agnes's gender transformation in the flood. For instance, even transgender is an inadequate term to describe Agnes's change, since in mainstream U.S. culture it implies someone who wants to change their *biological* gender; Agnes adopts a male disguise so that she may practice as a priest.

Anthropologist Christopher Vecsey, who consulted forty-eight versions of the Creation Story from dozens of anthropological and tribal sources for his interpretation of the Creation Myth (1988: xi; 64) and also conducted in-person interviews with tribal elders on Ojibwe reservations since the 1970s, acknowledges that from his outsider viewpoint, "simply understanding the Ojibwa Creation Myth in the Ojibwa cultural context is a difficult enough task" given that "in historical times the Ojibwas used the Creation myth to justify their traditional way of viewing the world . . . as an argument against Christian critics. As Ojibwas became defensive about their traditions, they might alter them or refuse to tell them in full" to historians, missionaries, and anthropologists, for instance.<sup>10</sup> As a result, "by the twentieth century, many storytellers no longer knew the episodes of this very lengthy myth; others added Christian elements" (1988: 67). In listening to various Ojibwe tribal members' interpretations, Vecsey finds that the Creation Story changes depending on the circumstances and the teller; yet reliably, the Story's basic elements remain the same: the

flood as transformative aspect of nature and Nanabohzo as shape-shifter and contradictory character.<sup>11</sup>

Erdrich draws on these recognizable elements of the Creation Story in Damien's spiritual conversion in the flood; in doing so, she revises the priest's role to convert Native people to Christianity on the reservation. Instead, she represents the Catholic priest undergoing a metamorphosis in nature. While Damien's spiritual rebirth in the river conjures the baptismal ritual of anointing new or born-again Christians by submerging their heads in water, the priest's new spiritual identity in the flood—he writes in a letter to the Pope, “in that river I drowned in spirit, but revived” (41)—suggests an Ojibwe worldview that *nature* itself has transformed Agnes's identity. In an ironic reversal of the missionary project on the reservation, Agnes's rebirth in the river challenges Catholic concepts of religious conversion as a one-way miracle in which Native people embrace Christianity at the expense of their tribal beliefs. As literary critic Alison Chapman points out,

[M]issionaries were apt to represent events such as eclipses, lightning strikes, and medical healings as miracles in an effort to manipulate and awe the Ojibwe into conversion . . . *Last Report* turns away from these miraculous transformations enacted by Sister Leopolda (as when a touch from her hand seemingly cures Quill's madness) and instead presents the transfiguration of Agnes



DeWitt into Father Damien as the truly miraculous event of the novel. (3)

Damien explains this miraculous change in a letter to the Pope: “I lost an old life and gained a new. . . . Things look different from the middle of a flooded river. In the flow, time is erased” (41). Damien’s description of the flood’s power to erase time echoes Nanapush’s explanation of “time” in Ojibwe ontology. When he tells Father Damien that time is “a moving fish that never stops. Sometimes in swimming through the weeds one or another of us will be shaken off time’s fin.’ . . . ‘Into the water?’ asked Damien. “No. Into something else called not time” (223). Agnes’s spiritual/gender transformation into a female/male Catholic Priest in the flood affirms a traditional Anishinaabeg worldview that metamorphosis, like the calm river waters that rise in a flood, represents a naturally occurring aspect of Creation.

Erdrich uses Agnes’s transformation in the flood to assert a tribal belief in the transformative power of place—a belief which, as part of its missionary project, the Catholic Church attempted to eradicate on Native American reservations. LaDuke explains the Catholic Church’s enforcement of Christian religious assimilation and its connection to the spatial politics of colonization:

Papal law was the foundation of colonialism; the Church served as handmaiden to military, economic, and spiritual genocide and domination. Centuries of papal bulls posited

the supremacy of Christendom over all other beliefs, sanctified manifest destiny, and authorized even the most brutal practices of colonialism . . . . Religious dominance became the centerpiece of early reservation policy as Native religious [and cultural] expression was outlawed in this country. (11)

Vecsey similarly finds that “a major portion of Ojibwe contact with whites [was] with missionaries” and that “under missionary pressure . . . the majority of Ojibwas have lost trust in the Manitos, ceased believing in the myths, and ended the practice of puberty visions” (1983: 26; 57). However, while traditional Ojibwe religion became fragmented by the missionary influence, Christianity did not “replace it as the center of Ojibwa life. . . . In some cases, Ojibwas were successful in joining traditional and Christian rituals” in order to maintain continuity of their religious practices while absorbing Christianity (58). Erdrich challenges the conversionary project of Christian missionary work on the Little No Horse reservation by showing how Father Damien moves away from strict Catholicism to embrace this traditional Ojibwe faith in nature’s transformative powers.

In changing his worldview to a blend of Catholicism and Ojibwe beliefs, Damien mirrors the syncretism employed by the traditional Ojibwe for cultural survival. Damien, who begins to “explor[e] worlds inhabited by both Ojibwe and Catholic” (211), experiences, during a

month-long illness, a vision quest in which he visits “countries of the spirit” with “many dim and tangled trails” and from which he returns only by following the light Mary Kashpaw leaves burning (211). This out-of-body travel leads Damien to increasingly depend on an Ojibwe worldview. When Nanapush takes Damien to the sweat lodge to help cure him of his illness, claiming, “[t]his is our church” (214), Damien knows it is “wrong for a priest to undertake God’s worship in so alien a place,” yet he nevertheless finds “peace” there (215). In praying, he begins to ask for “Saint Augustine, Nanabozho, whoever can hear [him]” (266), and the priest concludes in a letter to the Pope that the “forms of worship engaged in by the Ojibwe are sound, even compatible with the teachings of Christ” (49). Damien’s new understanding of the sacred, which revises the monoculture Papal Law tried to force on Native Americans, disrupts the imperialistic view that the reservation represents a completely colonized space.

### III

#### **Into the Woods**

In Father Damien’s narrative, the reservation woods, like the river, also offer a sacred Ojibwe space outside of the influence of the Catholic Church, a space in which to further shed the corporeal trappings of his former female identity. Entering the woods to meet Nanapush for the first time, Agnes prays “to stop the exasperating monthly flow that belonged to her past but persisted into the present”

(78); and when she stops to “change the cloth she buried deep in snow, she [finds] it barely spotted with darkness” (78). In order to adhere to the masculine norms of the Catholic priesthood, Agnes must reject aspects of her former feminine self. The loss of Agnes’s reproductive fertility in the woods reflects the loss of fertile tribal woodlands for the Ojibwe of Little No Horse. When the priest first arrives in 1912, the reservation is a place “still fluid of definition, appearing solid only on a map” (74) because the “government policy of attempting to excite pride in private ownership by doling out parcels of land to individual Ojibwe flopped miserably” so that “the boundaries came and went” (75). The Ojibwe reject the U.S. government’s definition of private property while Damien rejects her own gender boundaries.

By referencing this ongoing tribal land loss on the Little No Reservation, particularly the loss of sacred woodlands, Erdrich alludes to the devastation wrought by the Dawes Act of 1887 which gave the Bureau of Indian Affairs the right to allot any reservation land to white land owners and other colonial economic interests. This law ultimately led to a staggering transfer of Indigenous tribal lands to white landowners. In 1892, the U.S. government further encroached on the Turtle Mountain Band’s land base via the McCumber Agreement, which, as Connie Jacobs notes,

divested the Turtle Mountain Indians of their rights and title of almost 10,000,000 acres for the consideration of

\$1,000,000. This ‘ten-cent’ treaty was amended and approved by Congress on April 23, 1904. The tribe still claimed these lands when the government opened them up for European settlement. (29-30)

In all of Erdrich’s reservation novels ——*Love Medicine* (1984), *Tracks* (1988), *The Bingo Palace* (1994), *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001) and *Four Souls* (2004)— the woods represent the traditional woodland culture of the Anishinaabeg, a place for hunting, medicine, and ceremony; and as LaDuke reminds us, the sacred relationship between Native American people and their tribal lands has been continuously threatened by “a dominant culture with an immense appetite for natural resources” (14).

In *Tracks*, the earlier companion novel to *The Last Report*, Erdrich represents this dominant cultural threat through the Turcot Company, a “leveler of a whole forest” trying to cut down the oak trees surrounding Fleur’s cabin (219). Fleur relies on her own ingenuity and on a force of nature, a tornado, to kill lumber company workers, and the deep Ojibwe connection between place and people gets figured through Nanapush, who has a prophetic dream of the corporate invasion before it happens. He imagines himself standing in a forest of tall straight trees hearing “a loud report, thunder, and they toppled down like matchsticks, all flattened around me in an instant. I was the only one left standing. And now, as I weakened, I swayed and bent

nearer the earth” (127). Nanapush’s dream implies that his ability to survive the onslaught of corporate land encroachment will depend on his becoming like an ancient tree that bends to the earth but keeps its roots intact. In Erdrich’s *Last Report*, Nanapush continues to survive “marginally in the woods” (221) as he relies on his roots, the traditional woodland culture of the Ojibwe, to keep him alive in the face of shrinking tribal lands and the Christian missionary influence.

Given the combined territorial and cultural violations of colonialism and missionaries, part of the recovery work of Erdrich’s *Last Report* includes an emphasis on sacred Ojibwe places and spaces such as the woods.<sup>12</sup> LaDuke argues that because Papal Law on Native American reservations was so adverse to traditional Native cultural practices, “it was by necessity that Native spiritual practitioners went deep into the woods or into the heartland of their territory to keep up their traditions, always knowing that their job was to keep alive their teachers’ instructions, and, hence, their way of life” (12). Nanapush escapes his Jesuit education in *Tracks* by returning to the woods and forgetting all of his Catholic prayers (33); and as Midés, members of the Midéwiwin or Grand Medicine Society, both Nanapush and Fleur have knowledge of ancient woodland culture including traditional medicine and hunting, which allows them to survive even during times of starvation.<sup>13</sup> The “imaginative recovery of local place in literary representation,” argues postcolonial critic Indira Karamchetti, enables

“the liberation and recovery of the colonized self” (126). For Erdrich’s traditional Ojibwe characters, the woods provide a place to keep their traditions alive in the face of cultural genocide.

In *The Last Report*, the loss of sacred woods through U.S. governmental private property allotments and corporate timber cutting parallels the loss of “souls” through the missionary project of the Catholic Church on the reservation. As Mashkiigikwe says of the white people’s presence—both the U.S. government and the Catholic missionaries: “They take all that makes us Anishinaabeg. Everything about us. First our land, then our trees. Now husbands, our wives, our children, our souls. Why do they want to capture every little bit?” (*Last Report* 100). LaDuke echoes this sentiment when she writes of the loss of Native lands to corporate and governmental resource mining interests in the twenty-first century, “the challenge of attempting to maintain your spiritual practice . . . is complicated by the destruction of that which you need for your ceremonial practice” (15). As Erdrich’s Mashkiigikwe astutely observes, these ongoing territorial seizures once worked in tandem with Papal Law and its missionary project to prevent Native people from practicing their sacred place-based spiritual practices.

After nearly a century living amongst the Ojibwe, the elderly Father Damien articulates his own disapproval of the attack on Ojibwe cultural and spiritual practices by the Catholic Church. When Father

Jude asks whether or not Damien believes in the missionary project to convert the Ojibwe, he cries, “Oh no, I believe we were wrong!” (239).

Damien’s critique of the Catholic Church on the reservation manifests in how he handles the preparations for his own death. When the elderly priest travels to Spirit Island to find “death, the ultimate wilderness,” he plans to drown himself at the bottom of the lake surrounding the island so that his posthumous female body will remain undiscovered beneath his male priest’s robes (347). Imagining her soul’s afterlife, Agnes, whose hidden gender identity has been a combination of personal sanctuary and moral subterfuge within the Catholic Church, wants to “sneak by the hell gates and pearly gates into that sweeter pasture, the heaven of the Ojibwe” (346). By the novel’s end, Damien transforms from a Catholic priest into a practitioner of Anishinaabeg ceremonial rituals, wishing to return to the natural element that transformed his identity, and wanting to die in the waters off of Spirit Island, a place held sacred by the novel’s Ojibwe characters.

Although Erdrich tells us in her “Endnotes” to *The Last Report* that “the reservation depicted in this and in all of my novels is an imagined place consisting of landscapes and features similar to many Ojibwe reservations” (358), the fictional Spirit Island conjures the real Manitoulin Island on Lake Huron, which means “Spirit Island” or the Island of the Spirits in Anishinaabemowin (the Ojibwe language). On Manitoulin Island, the Wikwemikong Reservation, home of the Three



Fires Confederacy of Ojibwe, Odawa, and Pottawatomi tribes, remains the only unceded First Nations Indian Reserve in Canada (“Wikwemikong Heritage”).<sup>14</sup> As one of the few Native territories in North America never successfully colonized by Europeans, missionaries, or government treaties, the Wikwemikong Reservation on Manitoulin Island—like Spirit Island of Little No Horse—represents a sacred Anishinaabeg space that exists both within and without Western culture.

Father Damien’s dying journey to the Spirit Island thus suggests not only a symbolic movement away from Catholicism (the suicide by drowning he has planned is a sin) but also a movement *toward* the sacredness of place in Ojibwe culture. His last days spent on Spirit Island, in fact, follow the practices of a tribal Holy Man, for as Standing Rock Sioux scholar and activist Vine Deloria, Jr, writes, “[s]ince time immemorial, Indian tribal Holy Men have gone into high places, lakes, and isolated sanctuaries to pray [and to] receive guidance from the Spirits” (203). Ruminating by the fire on Spirit Island, Agnes speaks “aloud to all of the invisible, assembled spirits” (348-349) and imagining her own isolated death, she plans to “open herself to water” in order to “let creation fill her” (347). Her decision to end the priest’s life without last rites on Spirit Island signifies both a rejection of Catholicism and an affirmation of the spiritual practices, including the sacred power of place in creation and death, within Anishinaabeg culture. Dying,

Damien reflects upon Agnes's "nature as a woman," asking, "Who was this Agnes, or this Damien, this overlay of leaves and earth?" (347). This final reflection reminds us that like Father Damien's birth, his death does not occur against a backdrop of nature but rather as *part* of it. Erdrich's *Last Report* begins with the word "grass" and ends with the word "earth" (1; 355). The priest's return to grass and earth becomes an affirmation of the sacredness of place in creation and death in Anishinaabeg culture: a sacredness Papal Law views as pagan, colonialism attempts to destroy, and the reservation system endeavors to contain.

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Erdrich's inclusion of a traditional Anishinaabeg worldview in her novel offers a politically crucial perspective by giving voice to those marginalized outside of the center of mainstream norms and values in the United States. Moreover, through Damien's embodied-spiritual metamorphosis—in life and death—on Ojibwe land, the novel challenges Western culture's separation of the material world from the spiritual one—a paradigm that continues to justify dominant cultural appropriation and degradation of Native lands. As a counterpoint to such destructive paradigms, *The Last Report* instead demonstrates the inter-connectedness of people and place and honors the sacred power of the Earth.

Damien's female *and* male identity also emphasizes traditional Anishinaabeg acceptance of gender variance while it revises oppressive Western gender binaries through, what Soja would call, the "articulation of difference as a complex, on-going negotiation" of authorized power (Soja 143). The priest's trickster-like ability to inhabit a space outside of the norms of the Catholic Church and Western culture, like Nanapush surviving in the woods, reminds us of the literary strategies used by Erdrich herself. An author of Ojibwe and German descent, she embeds Ojibwe cultural symbolism and language in her novel written in English for a wide Western readership. In doing so, Erdrich *reports* that despite a tribal history of geographical and cultural fragmentation by Anglo-European colonialism, Christian missionary attack, the U.S. government's theft of land, and corporate America's pillaging of sacred woodlands, Anishinaabeg culture still exists in a powerful new form.

## Afterword

In 1959, when Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* was first produced, its representation of ghetto life was new on the American stage. Yet in terms of U.S. socio-spatial politics, ghettos in urban centers like New York and Chicago had been segregating the underclasses since shortly after the industrial revolution (Blunt 4), and today segregation continues. The ongoing politics of oppressive socio-spatial and environmental practices, what Alison Blunt and Gillian Rose call the "spatiality of historical experience" (Blunt 13), keep poor people, particularly poor people of color, confined in communities that lack the privileges of private property ownership. They typically are denied safe, clean, living and working environments, as well as a sense of belonging within mainstream U.S. culture.

Although I have focused on women writers, these socio-spatial narratives do not impact only women or only the poor, of course. African American journalist Brent Staples remembers a story from his graduate student days at the University of Chicago in the late 1980s. Visiting an unfamiliar neighborhood, he became well versed in what he calls the spatial "language of fear" (331). Walking at night in a relatively affluent area of Chicago, Staples watched in horror as a white woman ran away from him because, as a black male, his presence in her neighborhood was indistinguishable from "the muggers who

occasionally seeped into the area from the surrounding ghetto” (331). After that stunning moment, Staples began to whistle melodies from popular classical music whenever walking at night in such areas to appear “less threatening” to white pedestrians (333). Staples, like the African American scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr., arrested in 2009 by a white police officer for his allegedly unruly behavior while trying to gain entry to the front door of his home near Harvard University, understands the continual burden put on people of color to demonstrate their “right” to inhabit a “white” neighborhood.

In Staples’ and Gates’ experiences, we hear echoes of Lena and Walter Younger in Hansberry’s play fighting for *their* right to live peaceably in that white Chicago neighborhood a half century ago. Inside and outside literature, persistent insider/outsider politics of place and identity in U.S. culture get reinforced not only by xenophobic place attachment but also by a dominant culture that, as Adrienne Rich puts it, views “the geography of the body” as the determiner of our spatial destinies.

As we move into the twenty-first century, the discourse of place, space, and identity continues to gain currency and urgency. In the nationalistic fervor that followed the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Towers, securing national borders in the U.S. and proving U.S. citizens’ allegiance to the nation by establishing a recognizable “American” identity became a top priority for former President Bush’s “War on

Terror.” Higher security measures, including racial profiling and tighter passport controls, were implemented and heavily enforced at airports and border crossings.

Such strict border control measures continue to stir up national identity conflicts in the U.S. and abroad. Take, for example, the professional Iroquois Lacrosse team’s recent attempt to leave the U.S. In July 2010, the team refused to travel on passports issued by the U.S. and Canada because they do not consider themselves citizens of those countries, and, as a result, were denied entry into Britain where they were to play in the sport's world championship. The team’s captain said in a statement,

There simply was no way we could accede to the recommendation that we accept either American or Canadian passports to travel. The Haudenosaunee passports we travel on – like the game of lacrosse itself which our ancestors invented – are essential to our identity as a sovereign people making our way in the world community. (Caruso)

The Iroquois team’s assertion of its own six-nations’ tribal identity—the Haudenosaunee, whose people reside in the areas now known as the U.S. and Canada—is no less real to its cultural context than those “official” national-cultural identities recognized by Western governments. As evidenced in the Iroquois team’s fight for tribal

recognition by the Western world, we see how the politics of human identity take root in cultural concepts of place and space.

On the other hand, the popular trend of postmodernist discourse in the Western world, particularly prevalent in academia, tends to reject, and therefore to depoliticize, such fixed notions of identity. According to Marxist theorist Fredric Jameson, and the women writers I have examined clearly agree, postmodern spatial logic is fragmented in ways that speak to the cultural conditions of late capitalism (Jameson 1991: 16). This world of postmodern fragmentation holds both theoretical possibilities and practical risks, especially for marginalized groups. To disregard a person's political location in the world is to run the risk of ignoring the material realities, including the spatial and environmental experiences, of that person's existence.

The postmodern capitalist cultural tendency, which views human identity as fragmented, decentered—and therefore, meaningless—can fall into what literary critic Elizabeth Ammons calls “postmodern fundamentalism” (xi). By that she refers to a nihilistic movement that has been taken up “in elite academic circles”; like “right-wing fundamentalism,” it considers “human agency impotent, earthly disaster unstoppable, and the future beyond our control.” Ammons writes,

Just as global capital disregards the truth that the planet and life itself are not simply raw material to be endlessly

exploited and played with, so its cultural offspring,  
 postmodernism, disregards the truth that truth does exist  
 and that one paramount truth is the fact that the earth is  
 alive and must be respected and lived with in relationship.  
 (149)

Indigenous thinkers and others warn that a *spiritual* change in Western, capitalist thought is needed in order for human beings to reorient themselves to the sacred, to understand themselves as “part of the creation and not as masters of it” (27), nor as masters of one another. The activist tradition in American literature, offers Ammons, is one place where such fundamental change takes root. Politically aware writers help us to *imagine* alternatives to our fragmented postmodern world because, for those who are marginalized, there is a need, as bell hooks puts it, to develop “a community of resistance” (hooks 1991: 149). These communities are literal and figurative places and spaces in which oppressed people might “lodge” themselves, Adrienne Rich explains (Rich 1986: 11).

My dissertation’s aim has been to reveal how later twentieth-century U.S. women writers use literary narrative strategies to challenge forms of socio-spatial and environmental injustice, based, in large part, on such Western capitalist postmodern beliefs. I have emphasized how Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* critiques the mid-century American Dream which elides the economic exploitation of



African American labor in degraded urban areas and the systemic privileging of whites in protected suburban neighborhoods. I have shown how, in Helena María Viramontes' novel, the migrant farmworker Petra's religious protection of her children's U.S. birth certificates represents the hyper-vigilance of those who must daily document their "right" to live even marginally in the U.S. although their labor feeds the capitalist economy. I have focused on how Adrienne Rich's *Native Land* connects notions of nationalism in the U.S.—country, homeland, nation—to patriarchal, capitalistic narratives which legitimate racism, sexism, and environmental exploitation. I have concluded by demonstrating how Louise Erdrich's *Last Report* provides us with an Anishinaabeg alternative to traditional Western spatialized dichotomies of place, religion, and gender, especially those which separate anthropocentric from ecocentric issues. All of these writers challenge a Western postmodern capitalistic view that deems human relationship to the earth and to non-human nature as alienated, disassociated, or apolitical.

Yet I have also discovered another shared theme among these writers: *the love of place*. In closing, I want to suggest that this collective emphasis on emotional attachment to a particular place also represents a potent form of environmental activism. Author Leslie Van Gelder writes in *Weaving a Way Home: A Personal Journey Exploring Place and Story* (2008):

I believe that the solution to environmental issues will not come from a “clean up this mess before it’s too late” approach but instead through the exploration of that which we love and what we do to protect those whom we love. (13)

For Hansberry’s Mama, her love of gardening and her desire to make a real home keep alive her hopes of nurturing her family in an otherwise bleak urban existence. For Viramontes’ Petra, her cultural associations with the landscape of the U.S. West as Aztlán, her people’s rightful home, give her a sense of belonging that cannot be taken away by La Migra or the agribusiness bosses. For Rich, her personal connection to the New England landscape inspires a wellspring of creative energy in her poetry which in turn transforms into a political activist’s voice advocating for the land itself. And for Erdrich, her fictional Ojibwe Reservation, located on Matchimanito Lake in North Dakota, signifies an imaginary region based on a real Native American landscape. There the roots of oral tradition, sacred places, and cultural identity provide the inspiration for her traditional Native characters—especially Nanapush and Fleur—to fight for and preserve their tribal woodlands. Lawrence Buell argues that “environmentalism of any sort cannot hope to achieve even modest reforms unless *some* take extreme positions advocating genuinely alternative paths” (2001:7). Through their writing, Hansberry, Viramontes, Rich, and Erdrich all advocate alternative paths to the oppressive politics of space, place, and identity in mainstream

U.S. culture. At the same time, and also important to remember, these women writers rely on the power of positive place-attachment to show how, as anthropologist Keith Basso states, “we are, in a sense, the place worlds we imagine” (Basso 7). These writers affirm that we have the power to imagine our world a better place.

## Endnotes

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### Introduction

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of American women's regional writing, see the Introduction to *Writing Out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture*. Eds. Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Environmental racism is a term coined by the environmental justice movement, which signifies racial discrimination in targeting poor communities of color for pollution and other toxic practices, and excluding these same communities from environmental policy making.

<sup>3</sup> For a critical overview of Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*, see Chapter 2 in *Space, Difference, Everyday Life*, 27-45, from which these brief definitions of Lefebvre's theories are taken.

<sup>4</sup> In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa writes: "The Mexican woman is especially at risk. ... She cannot call on county or state health or economic resources because she doesn't know English and she fears deportation" (34).

<sup>5</sup> In addition to the ecofeminist works cited in Chapter Three of this dissertation, see Rachel Stein, *New Perspectives on Environmental Justice: Gender, Sexuality, and Activism* (2004) for a discussion of ecofeminist viewpoints.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Mies and Shiva's "Introduction" in *Ecofeminism* (1-21).

### Chapter One

<sup>1</sup> See *Black Metropolis*, the seminal study of Chicago's African-American community by sociologist Horace Cayton and anthropologist St. Clair Drake, published in 1945. Their research found two major barriers to African-American progress: the "job ceiling" and the "black ghetto." The authors attribute the preservation of the ghetto to racial restrictive covenants: "The Job Ceiling subordinates Negroes but does not segregate them. Restrictive covenants do both. They confine Negroes to the Black Belt, and they limit the Black Belt to the most rundown areas of the city" (113).

<sup>2</sup> In "The Problem of Lorraine Hansberry," Adrienne Rich asks, "Could the American, largely white, theater-going public of the 1950s and early

1960s have accepted as a central character a female revolutionary, a confrontational figure, a strong Black woman who was not Mama, who was, let us say, both angry and sexual, who could be seen moving into a more radical position as Walter Lee Younger and Sidney Brustein are seen moving as the play progresses?" (Blood 19).

<sup>3</sup> In "Inventing a Fishbowl: White Supremacy and the Critical Reception of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*," Robin Bernstein writes that when *A Raisin in the Sun* opened on Broadway in 1959, "the vast majority of white critics praised the play's 'universality.' One reviewer wrote, "A Negro wrote this show. It is played, with one exception, by Negroes. Half the audiences here are Negroes. Even so, it isn't written for Negroes....It's a show about people, white or colored." As Bernstein points out, "The phrase 'happens to be' appeared with remarkable frequency among reviews: the play was 'about human beings,' who happen to be Negroes" (1-2).

<sup>4</sup> Beneatha's hair is also a form of violated corporeal space in the play. As Asagai puts it, she believes that her natural hair is "ugly," because she "mutilate[s] it every week" in order to "assimilate" into dominant cultural beauty norms.

<sup>5</sup> Davis points out that the history of the birth control movement in the first half of the twentieth century often advocated for "birth control as well as compulsory sterilization as a means of eliminating the 'unfit' sectors of the population," an argument which often targeted poor and working-class women of color (215).

<sup>6</sup> The devastating socio-spatial and economic issues arising from an unexpected pregnancy for poor and working-class women of color remain dominant themes in latter twentieth-century women's working-class literature.

<sup>7</sup> Remarkably, Hansberry's representation of these complex race-and-class-based spatial politics occurs nearly a decade before they were officially recognized by the larger culture. In 1968, three years after the playwright's death, the Kerner Commission produced its "influential report on race and demographics in America" finding that the "suburb/city split" was "informed by ... a drive toward racial separatism and exclusion" (Beuka 190). This "drive toward racial separatism and exclusion" includes, of course, the boundaries of the African American ghetto—in Chicago, the area known as the Black Belt.

<sup>8</sup> Beuka points to the most famous example of suburban housing discrimination—the creation of the Levittown developments:

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Levitt and Sons chief Bill Levitt simply refused to sell any homes to African Americans. ...While noteworthy for his outspoken defense of such selective selling practices, Levitt was otherwise by no means a unique case, as racial restrictions and covenants (legal agreements between buyer and seller that no person of African descent could ever be allowed to live on the property) were common in the postwar suburban housing market. (188)

<sup>9</sup> Angela Davis shares Hansberry's view when she writes in *Women, Race, and Class*, "the enslavement of Black people in the South, the economic exploitation of Northern workers, and the social oppression of women" are all "systemically related" (66).

<sup>10</sup> The following excerpt from a letter Hansberry wrote to the *New York Times* in April of 1964 illustrates her own family history with Chicago housing discrimination:

The fact that my father and the NAACP 'won' a Supreme Court decision...is—ironically—the sort of 'progress' our satisfied friends allude to when they presume to deride the more radical means of struggle. The cost, in emotional turmoil, time and money, which led to my father's early death as a permanently embittered exile in a foreign country when he saw that after such sacrificial efforts the Negroes of Chicago were as ghetto-locked as ever, does not seem to figure in their calculations. (*To Be Young* 21)

<sup>11</sup> See John Cullen Gruesser's discussion on the influence of Ethiopianism on Hansberry's work, particularly in *Les Blancs* (1-19).

## Chapter Two

<sup>1</sup> In his *Santa Maria Sun* cover story, "The Heart of A Woman," Dunn refers to Lange's photograph as "one of the most famous photos in American history" (1).

<sup>2</sup> Denning asks: "Why did the story of the "Okie exodus" have [such] mythic power? What made it the emblem of the populisms of the age? Why did it become the story by which Americans narrated the Depression?" (262). Denning finds that the ideological crisis of the Depression was in part "a crisis of narrative, an inability to imagine what had happened and what would happen next." He writes, "The apocalyptic dreams of revolution of the young communists and their recurring appeals to the Soviet experiment were dramatic instances of the search for a powerful narrative resolution. ... [T]he way out was migration and the representation of mass migration became one of the fundamental forms of the Popular Front" (264).

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<sup>3</sup> For an account of Florence Owen Thompson's personal background, see Dunn's articles, "The Heart of a Woman" and "Photographic License." In "Heart," he writes: "Perhaps the greatest historical inaccuracy fostered by the Lange photograph was the perception that Florence Owens Thompson and her family were typical Dustbowl refugees of European descent. ... [W]hile the real migrant mother was, indeed, a native of Oklahoma, she was also a full-blooded Native American" (2).

<sup>4</sup> For Lange's reflections on the circumstances surrounding this famous photograph, see Lange.

<sup>5</sup> In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa writes: "The Mexican woman is especially at risk. ... She cannot call on county or state health or economic resources because she doesn't know English and she fears deportation" (34).

<sup>6</sup> In October 2008, around the time I completed writing this chapter, WWII-era braceros (manual laborers) from Mexico won a legal victory. Thousands of Mexican farm and railroad laborers, who had money withheld from their paychecks for work they performed in the U.S. during World War II, won a class action lawsuit against the Mexican government to repay them or their families a settlement sum of \$3,500 each to make up for their wages confiscated over 60 years ago: "Over a quarter million Mexican agricultural and railroad workers entered into braceros employment contracts to work in the U.S. between 1942-1946, and had 10 percent of their wages withheld by U.S. employers, which were then forwarded" to banks "and were to be paid to braceros upon their return to Mexico. The lawsuit alleges those funds were then never paid to the braceros, but instead were misappropriated by the Mexican government" ("WWII-Era").

<sup>7</sup> In discussing the idea of border-crossing in Chicana literature, Brady's work looks to Alarcón's idea of "mestiza consciousness" as the "formulation of a racialized, gendered subjectivity-in-process," which "emerges in relationship to spatiality, to the ongoing production of places"(52). Similarly, Anzaldúa's ideas of the "mestiza consciousness" inform my reading of the pluralistic modes of spatial consciousness in Viramontes' novel.

<sup>8</sup> Anzaldúa writes that in the U.S. Southwest, the only "legitimate" inhabitants are those in power, the whites and those who align themselves with whites" (*Borderlands* 26).

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<sup>9</sup> Anzaldúa recounts the following experience to illustrate the impact of the border patrol on the self-esteem of migrant farm workers:

In the fields, la migra. My aunt saying, ‘No corran, don’t run. They’ll think you’re del otro lao.’ In the confusion, Pedro ran, terrified of being caught. He couldn’t speak English, couldn’t tell them he was a fifth generation American. Sin papeles—he did not carry his birth certificate to work in the fields. La migra took him away while we watched. Se lo llevaron. He tried to smile when he looked back at us, to raise his fists. But I saw the shame pushing his head down, I saw the terrible weight of shame hunch his shoulders. (26)

<sup>10</sup> I take this term from the Preface of *Borderlands/La Frontera* when Anzaldúa writes of the “psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands, and spiritual borderlands” between cultures, races, classes, genders, and cultures (1).

<sup>11</sup> In its depiction of its characters’ toxic working conditions, the novel joins a body of Chicana environmental justice literature, including Ana Castillo’s *So Far From God* (1993) and Lucha Corpi’s *Cactus Blood* (1995).

<sup>12</sup> For a very thorough explication of Viramontes’ novel as a piece of environmental justice literature, see Christa Grewe-Volpp’s article.

<sup>13</sup> See Rich’s poem, *North American Time*, in which she acknowledges her own “verbal privilege” as a white poet in a landscape “where words are stolen out of mouths/as bread is stolen out of mouths/where poets don’t go to jail/for being poets, but for being/dark-skinned, female, poor” (*Native Land* 35).

<sup>14</sup> Estrella’s switching between Spanish and English in this scene signifies what Anzaldúa might call her “border tongue,” a language born of necessity for “a people who are neither Spanish nor live in a country in which Spanish is the first language; for a people who live in a country in which English is the reigning tongue but who are not Anglo” (77).

<sup>15</sup> The medical clinic scene also shows how narratives which misrepresent the migrant workers as either illiterate or second-class citizens inform how they are treated socially. Hence, the nurse’s superior attitude toward the family (as Estrella observes, “how easily she put herself in a position to judge”) when she speaks to Alejo as if he is a child and asks Estrella to translate in English to him (144, 139). To



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which Estrella dryly replies, “He’s the spelling champ of Hidalgo County. He understands English” (139).

<sup>16</sup> Mary Louis Pratt credits the efforts by writers such as Ana Castillo, Cherrie Moraga, Lucha Corpi, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Helena María Viramontes for repudiating masculinist “canonical interpretations” (quoted from Kafka 82).

<sup>17</sup> Grewe-Volpe discusses the role of the moon in this scene as a reference to Estrella’s budding sexuality and the mother’s fear that her daughter will also end up with an unwanted pregnancy. The author briefly discusses the fertility goddess “Coatlalopeuh” and her associations with female deities and the male Aztec preference for sun god imagery (67). I build on Grewe-Volpe’s argument by suggesting that not only does the scene invoke Indigenous symbolism, but also alludes to imagery (water/wailing) associated with La Llorona.

<sup>18</sup> Petra’s references to mouth-less unborn children echoes her fears that the crop pesticides will cause her baby to be born “without a mouth” and hence, no voice (Viramontes 125).

<sup>19</sup> For a detailed explanation of the connection between *Coatlalopeuh* (She Who Has Dominion Over Serpents) and *La Virgen de Guadalupe* see Anzaldúa’s “Entering into the Serpent” (Borderlands 47-61).

### Chapter 3

<sup>1</sup> Consider the recent patriotic nationalistic rhetoric following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States that envisions a united American “homeland” in need of security. See, too, Domosh’s essay for a compelling analysis of the link between nationalism and imperialism in the United States.

<sup>2</sup> I borrow this term from Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* in which he defines a nation as “an imagined political community [that is] imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign”.

<sup>3</sup> See especially Lefebvre’s definition of the “illusion of transparency” whereby social space as a social product is concealed. The Production of Space. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991, 27-29.

<sup>4</sup> We see this nationalized aggression toward “minorities” evidenced in the Immigration Act of 1924 which, in addition to limiting the number of immigrants to the U.S., including the outright banning of Asian immigrants, also had deeply Anti-Semitic roots.

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<sup>5</sup> Rich, the daughter of a Jewish father and gentile mother, often writes of feeling “neither/nor” (“Split” 101). Rich’s father came from Birmingham; her grandmother, a Sephardic Jew, from Vicksburg, Mississippi.

<sup>6</sup> For a thorough discussion of ecofeminism’s critique of sexism and speciesism (the oppression of non-human animals) as connected to patriarchal oppression, see Greta Gaard.

<sup>7</sup> For many working-class women of color, too, the Chicana farm women represented in Viramontes’ novel, for instance, domestic labor based on cultural expectations for women in the home constitutes a double-bind of gender exploitation.

<sup>8</sup> Rich writes in “The Wake of Home,” for example, of “the family coil / so twisted, tight and loose / anyone trying to leave / has to strafe the field / burn the premises down” (2. 9-12).

<sup>9</sup> In a 1999 interview, Rich explains that for her, “being Jewish has meant:--being a question. Not only as in “the Jewish Question,” but as a woman, a lesbian, a patrilineal Jew, a non-Zionist, within the whole argument and contestation about being Jewish” (Chametzky 994).

<sup>10</sup> See especially Churchill’s “Introduction: Encountering the American Holocaust” (1-18) and “Genocide in the Americas” (97-128).

<sup>11</sup> We hear echoes here, too, of more recent U.S. nationalistic rhetoric in which “God” is called upon to bless a unified “America.”

<sup>12</sup> As Anne Blackford notes, Rich “connects the Puritan’s self-repression with the resistance of her own child-self ‘backed silent against the wall/ trying to keep her eyes dry; haughty; in panic/ I will never let you know/I will never/ let you know’” (16). In fact, Rich’s ability in adulthood to psychically “purify” herself of childhood pain by writing about social injustice for others

<sup>13</sup> Some critics believe that Rich’s devotion to literary activism is dogmatic. As Jacobs notes, “Rich exposes herself to charges of allegorizing her subjects in the cause of speaking out for them, but she takes that chance in the hope of establishing a new ground on which Americans might shape their national narratives” (728). Jacobs cites Helen Vendler’s argument that Rich’s intended “ethical survey of American life in fact puts forth characters that are ‘allegori[es] ... of Oppression and Victimage’” (728). Yet Rich—like other activist writers—

appears willing to risk facing criticism that she is creating an allegorical world of oppression and victimage in order to call attention to the unequal politics of identity within the American landscape.

<sup>14</sup> A bioregionalist is one who believes that human activity, including environmental and social policies, should be based on ecological or geographical boundaries rather than economic or political boundaries.

## Chapter Four

<sup>1</sup> As Maria Orbin and Alan Velie explain in “Religion and Gender in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*,” “the name of the people that the government and most Americans have called ‘Chippewa,’ and which originally called itself ‘Anishinaabe,’ has changed over the years. Today most tribal members, especially in Minnesota and Canada, use ‘Ojibwe’” (27). Erdrich has similarly changed her use of “Chippewa” in her earlier reservation novels to “Ojibwe” in her *Last Report* and often refers to the “Anishinaabeg.” Following Erdrich, I use “Ojibwe” when referring to the Native characters and reservation setting of her novel and “Anishinaabeg” when referring to traditional Ojibwe culture. Anishinaabeg (also commonly spelled Anishinaabe) widely refers not only to the Ojibwe but also to the Odawa and Potawatomi tribes in the U.S. and Canada (“Wikwemikong Heritage”). Peter G. Beidler notes in his glossary to Ojibwe words and spellings in Erdrich’s novels that the spellings of Anishinaabemowin words, including “Anishinabeg/Anishinabeg,” vary by region and dialect and because they have evolved from “different ways of ‘hearing’ the words” (56).

<sup>2</sup>My fluid pronoun references to Agnes/Father Damien throughout this chapter are in keeping with Erdrich’s interchangeable references to Agnes as “her” and Father Damien as “him” throughout her novel. Erdrich’s switching underscores the instability of Agnes’s gender identity and disrupts Western gender binaries of either/or.

<sup>3</sup> See Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (1993). While my reading shares some of the Western feminist perspectives explained by Orbin and Velie, particularly Butler’s theory of gender performativity, I draw specifically on the work of feminist cultural geographers Doreen Massey and Gillian Rose in the first half of this essay in order to focus my reading on the *spatial* aspects of Agnes’s gender performance.

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<sup>4</sup> Keenan explains that “Two Spirit is not adequate in its translation because of its unintended but implied dichotomy associated with the Western binary” (3).

<sup>5</sup> For an overview of Erdrich’s Turtle Mountain Band tribal history, see Connie Jacobs, who refers to Erdrich’s tribe by its earlier U.S. government-given name, “Chippewa” (24).

<sup>6</sup> Parallel passages of Jesus’s transfiguration are found in Matthew 17:1-3 and Luke 9:28-36.

<sup>7</sup> I am indebted to David McNab for his explanation of the “power of natural and spirit worlds and the significance of time in Creation” in Indigenous thought in contributing peripherally to my own argument about the importance of place and creation in Erdrich’s novel (173). McNab references the flood scene in Erdrich’s novel as a Creation Story. However, he does not explain *how* the flood is connected to the traditional Ojibwe Creation Story itself. I use Christopher Vecsey’s explanation of the Ojibwe Creation Story to build my own reading of how Erdrich signifies elements of the Creation Story, including the flood, in Agnes’s transformation.

<sup>8</sup> See Vecsey’s detailed explanation of the Underwater Manito in *Traditional Ojibwa Religion and its Historical Changes* (1983). He writes, The Underwater Manito “possessed great and dangerous powers. It could cause rapid and stormy waters. . . . It was not totally evil, however. . . . It offered medicinal powers to those who accepted it as guardian” (74).

<sup>9</sup> Vecsey uses the more common spelling “Ojibwa,” but I follow Erdrich’s spelling of “Ojibwe” in my chapter.

<sup>10</sup> In addition to interviewing Ojibwe elders on their storytelling traditions, Vecsey’s work in the 1970s included helping Ojibwe people gather information for legal claims against mercury despoilment on the Grassy Narrows Reserve in Western Ontario. See his introduction to *Imagine Ourselves Richly*.

<sup>11</sup> All of the non-Native sources used in this chapter to explain Ojibwe cultural traditions draw on Native sources to corroborate their findings. Even so, for my reading of Erdrich’s flood story as a reference to the Ojibwe Creation Story, I acknowledge the limitations of these non-Native scholarly sources in researching this oral tradition. But as with any form of literary interpretation, I also rely on my own creative

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analysis in interpreting how Erdrich, an author working in the novel form, imaginatively draws on these traditional elements in her work.

<sup>12</sup> For a brief overview of the significance of the woods to Erdrich's reservation novels, see Connie Jacobs.

<sup>13</sup> Jacobs argues that "although in the twentieth century Christianity replaced the Midéwiwin as the primary religion, through Nanapush and Fleur Erdrich asserts the power of the old ways to cure and provide for the people" (25).

<sup>14</sup> For a brief historical overview of this unceded territory, see the Wikwemikong Heritage Organization's website.

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