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Positionality and Normative Geographies in Native American Women's Writings

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Abstract

The present study aims to revisit Louise Erdrich's Tracks, Polingaysi Qoyawayma's No Turning Back, and Diane Glancy's The Reason for Crows to understand the portrayal of normative geographies in these works. The study considers Tim Cresswell's theoretical formulations of normative geography to explore the constitution and Native American women's positionality within these normative geographic structures. The study maintains that Native American normative geographies are structured to maintain Native American patriarchal socio-cultural supremacy. The study also asserts that Native American woman is located at the margin of these biased normative geographic structures.

Key Words: Marginalization, Native American Fiction, Native American Patriarchy, Native American Woman, Normative Geography

Introduction

The notion of spatiality constitutes the centre of Native American female fiction writers. Along with the overarching spatiality of Native Americans in general, female fiction writers also talk about issues related to the Native American woman's location and position in Native American spaces and places. Issues related to the Native American female spatial situatedness, role, and experience received extraordinary attention in the works of Louise Erdrich, Linda Hogan, Polingaysi Qoyawayma, Leslie Marmon Silko, Paula Gunn Allen, Diane Glancy, LeAnne Howe, Marry Brave Bird, Lee Maracle, Heid E Erdrich, etc.

Keeping in view the theme of spatiality, the present study explores the works of Louise Erdrich, Diane Glancy, and Polingaysi Qoyawayma to understand how these writers depict the normative geographies within the overarching Native American spatiality. The study maintains that these writers do not take up the issues of space and place in isolation; rather, they combine these notions with the Native American woman's socio-economic, socio-cultural, and socio-spatial positioning within the Native American normative geographies. They create textual worlds upon the real-world models where they depict Native American women confined and marginalized within the Native American normative geography. The study offers a rereading of the selected fiction to illustrate the ways Native American women are spatially marginalized in the normative geographies of Native America.

Theoretical Framework

Tim Cresswell's (1996) notion of spatiality is constituted upon the notions of normative geography, out of place action, and transgression. These three fundamental aspects include both the geographical facet and the social façade of the notion of space and place. The notion of normative geography constitutes the foundations for the concepts of out of place action and transgression. Cresswell engages the notion of space and place to construct a socio-cultural paradigm, which he calls the "normative geography" (p. 9). He establishes the idea of normative geography upon the "sense of proper" (p. 3). The sense of proper emerges from certain expectations of behavior

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regarding a particular space and place. These expectations about behavior are determined at the intersection of geographical location and social position (p. 3). In other words, the notion of normative geography evokes people's social presupposition and geographical sense of appropriateness. Therefore, normative geography is a world that is governed by set rules and patterns that designate appropriate-ness and inappropriate-ness to a particular action. An action may be considered as appropriate in a particular place; however, at some other place, it may be considered inappropriate since it does not correspond to the expected behaviors at a place. Cresswell maintains that the notion of appropriateness or inappropriateness of a particular behavior is dictated by those who command social superiority within a social group (p. 5). In doing so, these socially superior classes develop a set of rules that defines or demarcate what is and is not a proper behavior within a geographical location. It is pertinent to note here that the designation of the proper behavior concerning a place is not established upon the naturalness of a place; rather, it is constituted upon the vested interests of the authorities who define these rules for appropriate and inappropriate actions. Such labelling of actions as appropriate and inappropriate regarding a particular place indicates the existence of "normative geography" (p. 10). This socially accepted normative geography constitutes the fundamental paradigm for an individual's relatedness or rootedness to a place. Resistance and difference are created by destabilizing the centre. The normative world often forms the centre, and beyond that, everything is marginal, resistant, and different. However, any effort to destabilize this normative geographic world requires some space and place. This destabilization occurs through out-of-place actions and transgression, which takes place in some defined space and place and thus creates "otherness" (p. 9). Since normative geography entails the relationship between space and accepted behavior, the present study explores engages the notion of normative geography to comprehend the Native American spatio-cultural practices that contributed to the emergence of ambivalent normative geographies in the prehistoric, pre-contact and post-contact eras. Besides, the relationship between place and the Native American woman's behavior in these places needs analysis to understand her response to the Native and Euro-American patriarchies in accordance with appropriateness or inappropriateness to certain actions within that normative geographic structure.

Analysis

The textual worlds portrayed in the selected fiction are constituted of real-world spaces and places. The plots of these works expand over distant spaces. The stories in these fictions unfold in geographically distinctive spaces since the event that constitutes the actions of the plot occur at locations that are constituted upon real-world places and locations. The link between the textual world of these narratives and their real-world counterpart is obvious and explicit in these narratives. The reader comfortably identifies the spaces mentioned in these works. For instance, the spaces portrayed in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* (1987) are familiar spaces. Louise Erdrich's textual world in *Tracks* is a juxtaposition of real and imagined spaces. However, the imagined spaces are also constructed upon models taken from the real Native American world. *Tracks* are the third novel in a series of four novels. Chronologically the novel constitutes the beginning of the story of the four Anishinaabe families. The novel is set in North Dakota. Erdrich never names the reservation mentioned in the novel. The reservation is located in the "North-central part" (Beidler & Burton, 1999, p. 10) of the state. Although, *Tracks* does not offer any information about the exact location of the reservation, however, the analysis of different directions given in other novels of the series reveals that the reservation in *Tracks* is modelled upon Erdrich's Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation. Beidler and Burton (1999) claim that in her novels, Erdrich consciously changes the location of the fictional reservation (p. 11).

Similarly, in *The Reason for Crows*, Diane Glancy (2009) constructs the Mohawk spaces of the novel upon real Mohawk spaces. Glancy portrays the real landscape of Auriesville, New York, in her fictional recount of Kateri's life. Glancy visits and trails the route that Kateri, the protagonist of the novel, takes to reach Sault St. Francis Xavier's mission from her village Caughnawaga. In the afterword section of the novel, Glancy informs the reader about her journey and visits to different places that constitute the geography of Kateri's story. In 2006, Glancy visited New York and Montreal to see Ossernon and Kateri's Old and New villages, Caughnawagas. Glancy visits Kateri's birth village Ossernon, located on a hill above the Mohawk River. She crosses the River Fonda, NY, off U.S. I-90, the water route that Kateri takes to reach her new village. The new village was located on a hill upstream on the other side of the Mohawk (p. 84). Furthermore, the attacks by the French army on Kateri's

village occur at the real space of Mohawk village. The French troops, under the command of General de Tracy, attacked the village in 1666; subsequently, Kateri's people leave the village and rebuild a new village, Caughnawaga, some fourteen miles west of the old village. Later, de Tracy orders his troops to burn the longhouses, wigwags and the entire village. The Mohicans, later on, attacked the new village in 1669. After Kateri's baptism, she decides to go to Sault. St. Francis Xavier Mission. Kateri travels more than two hundred miles to reach the Catholic mission of St. Francis Xavier mission at Sault St. Louis, near Montreal. The St. Francis Xavier mission is also a real place located in South Montreal, Canada. It was here that Kateri made her vow of perpetual virginity in her first holy communion. St. Peter's Mission that was built in Kateri's village, is also a real place that is now named the National Shrine of Blessed Tekakwitha, situated at Fonda, New York.

No Turning Back by Polingaysi [Qoyawayma \(1964\)](#) is an autobiographical work that narrates the life history of a renowned Native American teacher, poet and fiction writer. Her autobiography is subtitled 'A True Account of a Hopi Indian Girl's struggle to bridge the gap between the world of her people and the world of the White Man'. Just as the title suggests, the places depicted in the autobiography are real-world places. Polingaysi gives a detailed description of different Native American and white spaces. There are multiple places that are portrayed in this autobiographical work. These are places where Polingaysi has lived or travelled on either educational or professional errands. Furthermore, since Polingaysi receives first-hand experiences of these places, therefore, she portrays them in their reality. Polingaysi's portrayal of her village or her childhood and youth both are true accounts of the Hopi village, Oraibi. The White cities and towns where she lived during her educational and professional career are described rigorously in the autobiography. Her journey starts with her joining of the school in her village and lasts till her retirement and return to her village. During her journey, she attends Sherman Institutes, California, lives with a Mennonite family in Newton, Kansas, receives missionary training at Bethel College, gets appointed as a substitute teacher in Tuba City, studies Bible at Los Angeles Bible Instituted, and teaches at an Indian school in Hotevilla. The places mentioned are described in their actuality from 1906 until her retirement.

In the preceding section, I had discussed that the spaces portrayed in the selected literary works are real spaces. These spaces are constructed either on the model of real spaces, or they are depicted in their real form. My argument in the latter part of the work is to dwell on the notion that the selected Native American female fiction writers portray Native American space in its totality so that the reader can easily understand the normative geographies structured upon these spaces. I discuss the portrayal of the normative geographies in the selected literary works. I explore the spatial ambivalence in the normative geographies of the selected works in order to explore the ways in which the selected Native American female fiction writers in the selected works represent the spatial marginalization of the Native American woman. My focus is on the delineation of spaces that are portrayed as spaces of oppression. These are the spaces within the normative geography of Native America where Native American women experience marginalization. Therefore, this section includes a detailed discussion on the spatial distribution within these Native American societies as represented in the selected texts.

Normative Geographies in *The Reason for Crows*

In *The Reason for Crows*, [Diane Glancy \(2009\)](#) attempts to factually recount the protagonist's, Kateri Tekakwitha, spiritual journey. The novel is written against the backdrop of Kateri's sainthood in the year 1680. Hence, the foremost purpose is to portray Kateri's religious crisis, her conversion to Christianity, and her vow for eternal virginity. However, the novel does not limit to the portrayal of the religious crisis of the protagonist; rather, it also highlights the spatio-cultural setting of the Mohawk tribes. As stated earlier, that the textual world of the novel is modelled upon the real geographical world; therefore, the normative geography of the Mohawk tribe can be construed from the close reading of the text. However, once again, I maintain that my focus in this study solely rests on the delineation of the normative geography as portrayed in the selected works is limited to the portrayal of gender roles and the Native American woman's space.

The Reason for Crows narrates the story of a Mohawk girl, who is situated in a Mohawk village, Caughnawaga, on the bank of the Mohawk River. Traditional Mohawk tribes are one of the five tribes of the Iroquois League and are geographically located at the Mohawk River Valley. Mohawks were thickly populated tribes and spoke Northern Iroquois dialect ([Pritzker, 2011, p. 627](#)). Mohawks lived in longhouses made of elm bark and had a

“nested form of social organization” where the longhouse family was a basic unit of the society (Luebering, 2011, p. 49). The longhouse accommodated multiple families, and the households were divided among different clans. Mohawks were socially and politically developed tribes and had established socio-spatial hierarchies. Diane Glancy (2009) portrays traditional Mohawk normative geographic structure with a predefined spatial allocation of the Mohawk woman and gender roles in *The Reason for Crows*. The Mohawk normative geography, as portrayed in the novel, is divided into two distinctive spatialities. On the one hand, the men of the Mohawk tribes control the public space. While on the other hand, the Mohawk women are confined to the private spaces of the home. This ambivalent spatial allocation accords a marginalized spatial status to the Mohawk woman in the social hierarchy.

Within the normative geographic structure, Mohawk men and women had spatially allocated spaces and gender roles. Men held councils, hunted fish, and engaged in wars, thus occupied the public space. Mohawk women picked corn, collected bundles of firewood from the forest, beaded, made ribbons, baskets, boxes, and large casks (Glancy, 2009, p. 5). The primary occupation of the Mohawk men was military activities and the fur trade that was bartered for firearms and alcohol. The Mohawk men occupied the public spaces, where they engaged in wars with other tribes and indulged in hunting expeditions. On the other hand, women in Mohawk tribes engaged in agriculture, clothing and other domestic chores (Kuiper, 2011, p. 146). The Mohawk women attended those injured during hunting and wars. Kateri, like other women, had a prescribed role within the Mohawk normative geography. The Mohawks had developed an agricultural system; however, the agricultural spaces were specifically designated to the Mohawk women. Mohawk women planted fields, grew corn, beans and other crops (Glancy, 2009, p. 13). When there were no crops, Mohawk women gathered roots and bark (Glancy, 2009, p. 10). Mohawk women were domestic workers. At home, Mohawk women prepared belts to be traded for thimbles, glass beads, iron awls etc. (Glancy, 2009, p. 7); however, they had no role in the trading process except for preparing the saleable materials. The Mohawks believed in Animism, and religion was open to both men and women, where women could also attend spiritual and medicinal powers. However, Mohawk men despised Mohawk women’s conversion to Christianity. Therefore, Kateri’s uncle, Lowerano, does not approve of Kateri’s acceptance of Christianity, and Kateri has to keep her conversion secret for some time. When all know Kateri’s conversion, her tribesmen persecute her for her new religion. There are scores of events when young boys stone her when she is busy doing her domestic chores (Glancy, 2009, p. 40). Consequently, Kateri decides to leave her village and go to Sault St. Louis. In addition, within Mohawk tribes, the chieftainship was hereditary and was specific to the Mohawk men. Elderly women could be the clan mothers in some tribes, but not every Mohawk woman was given such a status. The hereditary chieftainship in the tribe is exclusively reserved for the men of the tribe. Kateri’s uncle, Lowerano, is the chief of the tribe, and before that, Kateri’s father was the chief of the tribe. These ambivalent dynamics of the Mohawk normative geographies attest to the fact that Mohawk normative geographic structure was oppressive and it marginalized the Mohawk woman.

Normative Geographies in *No Turning Back*

In *No Turning Back*, Polingaysi Qoyawayma (1964) narrates her life history, educational pursuits, professional ambitions, and her efforts to bridge the cultural gap between the Whites and Hopi people. Polingaysi’s narrative is a commentary upon the United States government assimilation policy through the establishment of the boarding schools in the Native American reservations. Polingaysi narrates her journey to the different towns and cities of the United States in pursuance of educational and professional goals. However, the narrative sheds light upon the ambivalent normative geographic structure of Hopi society. It identifies the difference in the spatio-cultural positioning of the women in both the Hopi society and the Euro-American society. Since the narrative is a life history of the author and portrays the events and places in their real identity, therefore, the normative geographic structures delineate a realistic portrayal of the spatial positioning of the Native American woman within the Hopi and Euro-American spaces.

No Turning Back is a life narrative of a famous author and educationist. The narrative is a commentary upon the prejudiced normative geographic structure of the Hopi society. Although the Hopi people had a “highly developed” (Volvo & Volvo, 2007, p. 363) culture, the overarching normative geography was constituted upon imbalanced spatial distribution. Hopi’s are agrarian cultures, and agriculture was the dominant source of

livelihood. Traditionally, Hopi societies were matrilocal, where married daughters lived with their mothers. However, within this socio-cultural setup, the Hopi woman had a spatially marginalized position. The normative geographic structures of pre-and post-contact eras were ambivalent in the sense that they accord lower position to the Hopi woman. Hopi men and women had defined gender roles and spaces. Hopi Men occupied the public spaces, like hunting grounds and agriculture, whereas Hopi women were limited to domestic chores and household activities. However, this spatial division was not the traditional spatial allocation, rather in early periods, the Hopi women mostly did farming, in later periods when hunting decreased, men occupied the agricultural spaces, and women took domestic chores ([Luebering, 2011, p. 96](#)). At home, Hopi women made clay pots, decorated with geometrical designs, prepared baskets and food. Hopi men prepared cotton clothing and blankets for sale. Hopi people dug kivas, which are underground rooms used for worship and public gatherings. However, Hopi women were not allowed to enter these spaces and can only visit these places when they were invited specifically for some errand. Traditionally, Hopi society is matrilocal and matrilineal; however, the spatial division designated Hopi women a marginalized socio-spatial position. Hopi society was a female-dominated society; however, it did not guarantee a superior role to the Hopi woman. Indeed, there was particular importance given to the woman's role in the socio-cultural setup; however, the Hopi society did not accord any specific superior place to the Hopi woman. The gender roles in Hopi society were fixed, and both genders had specific spatially allocated roles within the normative geography of the Hopi society. In *No Turning Back*, Polingaysi (1964) highlights the prevalent ambivalence in the Hopi normative geography. The spatial division in the Hopi normative geography is founded upon the marginalization of the Hopi woman. This division of spaces in Hopi society is gender-biased, where the Hopi woman is accorded marginalized spatial position. The spatial division is instilled among the Hopi men and women from a very early age. Hopi mothers train their daughters in traditional domestic chores so that they occupy the designated spaces in the Hopi normative geography (p. 35). This training is aimed at preparing young girls to be efficient in undertaking the responsibilities of homemaking and children.

Normative Geographies in *Tracks*

[Louise Erdrich's \(1987\) *Tracks*](#) is a commentary upon the repercussions of the United States government's policies related to land allotment in the last decades of the nineteenth century. The story of the novel is written in the backdrop of the United States government 1887's Dawes Act. Erdrich, through her narrative, comments upon the roles of United States government policies in general, and the Dawes Act in particular, in furthering the ambivalence in the Native American normative geography. The narrative underlines the change in the Anishinabe gender roles after the implementation of the Dawes Act of 1887. United States government policies, which aimed at assimilating the Native Americans within the socio-political structure, further destabilized the normative geographic constitution of the Native American society. Consequently, the spatio-cultural structures of the Native Americans became more suppressive for the Native American woman. Erdrich in *Tracks* aims to identify the struggle of the Native American woman to challenge the imbalanced normative geography within the Native American space. Indeed, the narrative is an imaginative work of fiction; however, Erdrich has used real spaces and places in this narrative in order to make the narrative more meaningful.

Traditionally, Ojibwa people are hunters, and they migrated from one place to another in search of hunt throughout the year ([Luebering, 2011, p. 38](#)). Some tribes picked wild rice; however, Ojibwas were not agrarian cultures as a whole. The socio-cultural structure accords the Ojibwa men a spatially superior position as they indulged in hunting expeditions, and for that, they travelled to distant places. The Ojibwa women, on the other hand, stayed at home because women were considered weak and thus restricted to domestic work. In later centuries, the Ojibwa people also indulged in the fur trade with the Euro-Americans; however, these trading spaces were reserved for Ojibwa men, and women were not encouraged to enter the fur trade. Thus the public space was redefined in a way that barred the Ojibwa woman from entering into this space. In addition, Ojibwa society was established on a patrilineal social setup that further reified the marginalization of the Ojibwa woman. The chieftainship was hereditary, and men from a chief's family would ascend to the chieftainship, whereas women were not entitled to any such prestige. The consequent normative geography accorded a privileged space to the Ojibwa men, whereas Ojibwa women are restricted to marginalized spaces.

Tracks delineate the story of an Anishinabe girl, Fleur Pillager, who, although she survives the consumption, however, is confronted with yet another dilemma, i.e. saving her ancestral lands from being taken by the government. The idea of losing land puts her into spatial anxiety, and she decides to earn money to pay the allotment fee on her lands. However, to do so, Fleur must engage in destabilizing the normative geographic structure of the Ojibwa society. In *Tracks*, [Louise Erdrich \(1987\)](#) has portrayed Fleur's out of place actions that culminate in her transgression of the Ojibwe normative geography. In order to save her lands, Fleur herself takes the responsibility to raise money to pay the annual allotment fee. Fleur takes a job at the Kozaka's Meat and thus revolts against the predefined Ojibwa woman role. Nanapush, the epitome of the Ojibwa patriarchy, coerces Fleur to think that she is not able to defend her lands, and the lands will eventually go, but Fleur shuns all such warnings and threats and successfully collect money to pay the annual allotment fee. At the end of the novel, Fleur fails to deposit the allotment fee on her lands, but it is not because she is unable; rather she is cheated by the Ojibwa patriarchy. Erdrich, through the narrative, establishes the ways in which Ojibwa patriarchy tries to maintain the normative geographic structure of the society and limits opportunities for the Ojibwa woman for any possible transgression. However, Fleur, through her out of place actions, challenges the already existing Ojibwe normative geography, and through her transgression, establishes new space and place for her.

Conclusion

In the preceding sections, I discussed the socio-cultural context that contributed to establishing the biased and ambivalent Native American normative geography. The study reiterates that Native American patriarchal supremacy reified these oppressive normative geographies throughout history. Arguments stated above maintain that the selected fiction writers portray the socio-spatial ambivalence of Native American normative geographies to exhibit Native American woman's marginalized positionality. Native American normative geographies accorded marginalized spatial status to the Native American women that further the reification of Native American patriarchal supremacy.

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