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PLACING RELIGION:
THE SPIRITUAL GEOGRAPHY OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS

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ABSTRACT

My project, *Placing Religion: The Spiritual Geography of Twentieth-Century American Women Writers*, explores the ways in which American women writers use narrative (both fictional and nonfictional) to construct a relationship between Christianity, family history, and place. More specifically, the writers I discuss portray a similar pattern: the protagonist returns to a geographical place associated with her mother and with maternal spirituality, and thus she is finally able to find her own “place” within an ostensibly patriarchal religion. This emphasis on particular places is by no means limited to writers dealing with Christian tradition; however, I narrow my focus to Christian writers because Christianity’s emphasis on the Incarnation of Christ—the entrance of the divine into a particular time and place—often affects the portrayal of spiritual geography in specific ways.

In addressing twentieth- and twenty-first-century women’s writing about spirituality and place, then, I draw from a wide range of disciplines: ecocriticism, feminist geography, feminist theology, the theology of place, and literary theories about narrative. Using these tools, I suggest that, throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, women writers have found space and place fruitful in negotiating their position within Christian religious traditions.

The texts I explore cover a broad range of time (from 1943 to 2003) and genres (conversion narrative, memoir, novel, and short story) but they are linked by a similar narrative arc. Many of these writers portray a paradoxical return “home,” through tracing maternal roots, to a place within religion—a particular place, but not a static, fixed place—rather, a particular place always in flux. This narrative thread gains momentum
when read in conjunction with feminist mobility theory, for it offers new possibilities to feminists who find problematic the theoretical trends encouraging them to construct themselves as “nomads.” In these works of spiritual geography, the protagonists manage to find a located, communally responsible, “mobile home” through writing and performing religion.
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Chapter One
Introduction: Common Ground between Feminism and Spiritual Geography

Since the election of 2000, and even more so since the election of 2004, we in the United States have accepted a new form of determinism: the determinism of geography. We toss around the terms “Red State” and “Blue State” as shorthand for certain political, cultural, and religious beliefs. We have accepted the generalization that the South, the Great Plains, and the Rocky Mountain regions are both Republican and evangelical Christian, while the Northeast, the industrial Midwest, and the West Coast are Democrat and secular. Religion, politics, and place seem to have become fused in a monolithic muddle.

If one looks at two maps—a map showing states voting Republican and Democrat in the 2000 presidential election (Figure 1), and a map showing concentrations of religious affiliation across the United States (Figure 2)—there does seem to be significant correlation between the swath of red on the political map (indicating states whose electoral votes were given to the Republican candidate, George W. Bush) and the maroon and salmon areas on the religious map (indicating areas where over 50 percent of the residents of a county considered themselves adherents of some religion). However, maps such as these hide the true heterogeneity of belief that can exist within, say, a single county in Minnesota or Arkansas. There you may find “religious” people (and not necessarily all Christians) who vote Democrat for economic reasons, atheist Republicans, and all sorts of combinations that such maps render invisible.

While the Red State/Blue State dichotomy has at least called our attention to relationships between place and belief, it has also led us to simplify and generalize our
view of those relationships. When I use the term “spiritual geography,” then, an image of the religious adherents map conflated with the 2000 election map might initially spring to mind. I mean no such thing. I do, however, see in the Red/Blue language an indication of our need to resist simplistic associations between religion and place—by emphasizing particular places in which religious dramas unfold for individuals and communities. Furthermore, we need to clearly define and sometimes strategically redefine the words we use to describe religion and place.

My project, *Placing Religion: The Spiritual Geography of Twentieth-Century American Women Writers*, explores the ways in which writers use narrative (both fictional and nonfictional) to construct a relationship between Christianity, family history, and place. More specifically, the writers I discuss portray a similar pattern: the protagonist returns to a geographical place associated with her mother and with maternal spirituality, and thus she is finally able to find her own “place” within an ostensibly patriarchal religion. This emphasis on particular places is by no means limited to writers dealing with Christian tradition; however, I narrow my focus to Christian writers because Christianity’s emphasis on the Incarnation of Christ—the entrance of the divine into a particular time and place—often affects the portrayal of spiritual geography in specific ways (ways that I will explain later in this chapter).

In addressing twentieth- and twenty-first-century women’s writing about spirituality and place, then, I draw from a wide range of disciplines: ecocriticism, feminist geography, feminist theology, the theology of place, and literary theories about narrative. Using these tools, I suggest that, throughout the twentieth and twenty-first
centuries, women writers have found space and place fruitful in negotiating their position within Christian religious traditions.

The texts I explore cover a broad range of time (from 1943 to 2003) and genres (conversion narrative, memoir, novel, and short story) but they are linked by a similar narrative arc. Many of these writers portray a paradoxical return “home,” through tracing maternal roots, to a place within religion—a particular place, but a not a static, fixed place—rather, a particular place always in flux. This narrative thread gains momentum when read in conjunction with feminist mobility theory, for it offers new possibilities to feminists who find problematic the theoretical trends encouraging them to construct themselves as “nomads.” In these works of spiritual geography, the protagonists manage to find a located, communally responsible, “mobile home” through writing and performing religion.

Laying the Groundwork, Defining the Terms

Before explaining how feminism, geography, and the Christian theology of the Incarnation interact in my project, I should first define “spiritual geography” itself. I use the term to refer to the practice of creating narratives to explore connections between place and the divine. “Spiritual geography” first began to garner attention with the publication of James S. Griffin’s *Beliefs and Holy Places: A Spiritual Geography of the Pimería Alta* (1992), followed soon after by Kathleen Norris’s *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (1993), one of the major works I address in this project. While Griffin’s book is an anthropological study detailing the religious beliefs and practices of people in a particular region, Norris’s work describes how her personal spirituality grew in interaction with the land and people of rural South Dakota. Norris herself defines spiritual
geography as “the place where I’ve wrestled my story out of the circumstances of landscape and inheritance” (Dakota 2). As Martha L. Henderson explains in her 1993 article “What Is Spiritual Geography?”, Norris’s definition evokes the biblical image of Jacob wrestling with God (an event that occurs at a particular place, which Jacob commemorates by giving that place a name)\(^1\), and this metaphor allows her to compare “developing a human-land relationship to the development of a relationship between the natural and the supernatural” (Henderson 470). Dakota chronicles Norris’s geographical move to her grandmother’s home in South Dakota and her resulting conversion/return to her grandmother’s religion: Christianity. Place, then, becomes both the vehicle and the metaphor for Norris’s relationship to the divine.

Of these two early-1990s works, Norris’s Dakota has been by far the more influential among subsequent women writers dealing with religion and place, perhaps because of its emphasis on redefining both geographical and theological terms. In a significant passage from Dakota, Norris highlights the term “frontier” as a metaphor for rooted spirituality, in the process redefining it to redeem it from its oppressive connotations:

> Perhaps I am redefining frontier not as a place you exploit and abandon but as a place where you build on the past for the future. When we journey here, we discover it is no less old than new. T. S. Eliot wrote, ‘The end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time.’ Against all the odds, I rediscovered the religion I was born to, and found in it a home. (133)

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\(^1\) Genesis 32: 24-32 recounts this story.
“Against all the odds”—the odds that a feminist would find a place in a religion so often patriarchal in manifestation, the odds that a mobile American would develop a deep, lasting relationship with a particular place—Norris discovers in her physical location roots that enable her to place herself within a religious tradition. Nor is she the only contemporary American writer to do so. Anne Lamott’s *Traveling Mercies*, published in 1999, uses similar geographical metaphors—and the same quotation from T. S. Eliot—to describe her conversion to Christian faith, a faith grounded in a particular experience of community. Terry Tempest Williams’s slightly earlier work, *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*, explores the formative effect of nature, and of Williams’s mother’s and grandmother’s relationships to nature, on Williams’s placement in Mormon Utah. These contemporary conversion narratives have earned places on bestseller lists and on bookshelves across the U.S., but, with the exception of Williams, they have rarely been studied in an academic setting.

Collections such as Harper’s annual *The Best Spiritual Writing of _____* (pick a year, any year since 1998) or *A Woman’s Path: Women’s Best Spiritual Travel Writing*, published in 2000 and in a second edition in 2003 by the Travelers’ Tales series, testify to the popularity of writing about spirituality, particularly writing by and targeted to women. The anthologizing of these short pieces suggests that readers may be drawn by recognizing the name of a writer they’ve enjoyed—such as Kathleen Norris or Anne Lamott—and may wish to use the collection to find other, similar writers. Anthologies appear once some of the writers included within have already achieved a popular following; however, as geographer Yi-Fu Tuan suggests, “Anthologies invade the market when new and pressing interests develop and we are unsure what they are about and
where they lead” (2). Themed anthologies emerge when we don’t know how to theorize about a particular style or genre of writing.

Then again, perhaps the anthologizing trend reflects our unexamined cultural assumption that the association of women, spirituality, and place, is natural and that it needs no further analysis. This triad—particularly as portrayed in domestic home settings—characterized much of nineteenth-century American women’s writing and earned it scorn in the eyes of many male modernist critics. Feminist scholars began to remedy this bias over thirty years ago, acknowledging the place of religion in nineteenth-century literature and rhetoric. However, far too many feminists shy away from discussing religion in contemporary literature; the topic is safer if historicized. We need to do some theorizing work with twentieth-century women’s writing about spirituality and place. Exploring the ways in which texts continue to construct the relation between women, religion, and place is a necessary task if we want to resist gender essentialism in our thinking about these issues.

Other Terms: Place/Space, “Home,” Religion/Spirituality

The typical narrative approach to geography involves a distinction between space and place: essentially, “space” is what exists before humans attach a story to a geographical area and make it into a “place.” However, this distinction between space and place puts potentially damaging emphasis on “place” as a servant of human needs and as “virgin soil” onto which humans can impress their own stories. As feminist geographer Gillian Rose points out, male geographers who have spoken of place rather than space have sometimes sought to acknowledge the power of place as “Other,” but
that they have, in the process, essentialized place as feminine: “Place is understood in the same terms as a maternal Woman; humanistic geography is characterized in terms of a relationship with the (m)Other” (59). To resist this trend, we need a way of acknowledging that place/space is never completely transparent, never completely knowable—in other words, that place is, in some ways, genuinely “other.” Yet we must also resist the impulse to personify the otherness of place, an impulse that often results in characterizing place according to racialized or gendered stereotypes. If the otherness of place is emphasized through the human constructs of race and gender, it becomes far too easy to exoticize or “orientalize” places and the people we associate with them. Recognizing the non-human Otherness of place, its participation in the divine, may help us to resist creating it in our own image (or that of human others).

The writers I study do not always make an explicit distinction between space and place (though I will usually use the term “place” in my discussions of their work). ² Because they are writing narratives (fictional or nonfictional) of encounters with place, their portrayal of place does have a humanistic emphasis. However, unlike some humanistic geographers, they for the most part recognize place as an agent. ³ Most spiritual geographers take into account the power of nature (or the power of the divine working through nature) to write its own story through place, whether humans perceive it

² To some extent, Christian spirituality productively collapses distinctions between “space” and “place” as they are associated with “nature” and “culture,” respectively. To Christians, both nature and culture (the constructs through which nature is perceived) may be sources of divine revelation. David Brown writes, in *God and the Enchantment of Place*, “What, however, must even now be conceded is that the natural seldom acts apart from the cultural: apart, that is, from particular traditions of interpretation. Yet even these should not be confused with the purely human: God can also be active within particular traditions and patterns of interpretation. Indeed it is arguable that, because all human experience occurs within specific contexts, even God cannot be experienced without being interpreted in the light of what is already understood or known” (33).
³ So, too, does Yi-Fu Tuan, the famous cultural geographer, who coined the term “geopiety” to refer to a reciprocal relationship between person and place.
or not. As Philip Sheldrake writes, “The physical landscape is a partner, and an active rather than purely passive partner, in the conversation that creates the nature of place. It is paradoxical that so much radical contemporary writing on the politics of place fails to mention the non-human element at all” (Spaces 15). In my dissertation, I explore how women writers of spiritual geography acknowledge the mystery of non-human—particularly divine—involvement in shaping and narrating place. In addition to recognizing the independent agency of place, the writers I survey do not other-ize place by depicting it as feminine (though, as I will later discuss, some of them do fall into the trap of trying to show the otherness of place by exoticizing it in association with racial others). These writers follow a common pattern of associating the spiritual power of place with their maternal roots, but they do not view place itself as feminine. As a matter of fact, the emphasis on maternal roots symbolizes finding an alternate, non-masculine-dominated path to an ungendered holy ground.

Of course, any discussion of place—and especially of return to a place associated with the mother—has to bring up the history of gendered notions of home. With the rise of industrialism and bourgeois capitalism in the West, women became increasingly associated with the home and men with movement, travel, and the “outside.” Home, from the male perspective, is static because it is always there for him to return to: he may change, but home—and the women occupying it—never do. The women writers in my dissertation in some ways disrupt this association by being themselves the travelers who return home to a place and a religious tradition. However, one could still argue that the trope of a return home merely repeats the already established patriarchal pattern, especially because these writers still associate home with the maternal. I argue that the
key difference between the male return home and the return that these female spiritual geographers describe is that home—both place and religious tradition—is not viewed as static: it is capable of change, and of changing the writer/narrator.

I strive to place my discussion of spiritual “homes” in the context of feminist discussions about home, exile, and mobility in the globalized world. As Karen Halttunen points out in “Groundwork,” her 2006 address to the American Studies Association, many current laments about American “placelessness” (some of which come from spiritual geographers) depend upon “a deeply conservative, essentialist understanding of place as a static location for a rooted sense of identity that is inescapably threatened by movement and flux. Their world view, to quote anthropologist Liisa Malkki, is ‘sedentarist,’ privileging roots, place, and order over movement” (2). The writers in my dissertation certainly value their maternal spiritual “roots,” and they associate those roots with particular places. However, I also want to argue that the spiritual dimension of these writers’ works also makes them aware of the “routes” (to use Paul Gilroy’s key term) that often exist within and around “roots.” Spiritual geographers are uniquely situated to understand the complex relationship between roots and routes—not creating a binary between them, but realizing the many ways in which they connect and overlap. As Charles Mitchell writes of Kathleen Norris’s and Terry Tempest Williams’s portrayal of sacred home-space, “To be rooted in a place and in a family is to be rooted in change, committed to an attitude of attentiveness, adaptation, and reciprocity; to resist that change and insist on stability and control is to court alienation from the world and from the self”

4 I believe this is a particular strength of African American women writers’ spiritual geography, as I will discuss later in Chapter Five.
Again, for spiritual geographers, because of their emphasis on the history of place and community and the divine, routes can exist within roots—and vice versa.

The most significant intertwining of roots and routes for Christian spiritual geography is the belief in the simultaneously “already and not yet” qualities of residence in the “kingdom of heaven.” According to Christian belief, those who follow and practice Jesus’ teachings already live in the kingdom of heaven, for they are living with Jesus in the daily circumstances of their lives; however, there is also a sense in which they eagerly await dwelling with Jesus in “a new heavens and a new earth.” In Christian spiritual geography, then, places always can embody heaven, while at the same time pointing to the heaven beyond—and to a text from the past. In some ways, the place of heaven in Christian spiritual geography is similar to that of any utopia; however, the simultaneity of the already-heaven and the not-yet-heaven, their ability to coexist in one place, sets apart Christian spiritual geography. Christians have always believed in the power of sacred place to collapse time: the act of communion, taking place at the Eucharistic table, has been described as “anamnesis,” an act of “un-forgetting” so complete that the communicant is present with Christ at the Last Supper. Throughout history, Celtic Christians have also believed in “thin places,” geographical sites where the barrier between heaven and earth is so thin that time poses no hindrance to communication with the saints of the past.

In spite of these positive examples, Christian history also offers plenty of instances of suspicion or at least disregard of place. Many politically conservative American Christians of today justify their lackadaisical attitudes about global warming and environmental pollution by claiming that the world will end soon anyway, and Jesus
will come to “rapture” the faithful (obviously, not all Christians hold the “already-and-not-yet” aspects of heaven in productive tension). As simplistic as this belief is, it does have some roots in a longstanding Christian concern with avoiding the idolatry of place. Place-idolatry can take the form of pantheism or of worshipping one particular place, believing God cannot be encountered anywhere else, and thus, by implication, believing that others elsewhere do not have access to God. As Belden Lane writes, “From a Christian theological perspective, the cultural construction of place requires a hermeneutics of suspicion—a warning that God ultimately stands beyond all places and times and cultural forms, beyond all the brokenness of human language” (Landscapes 253). The challenge, then, is to maintain faith in the ability of particular places to embody (incarnate) the divine, without limiting the divine to any one set of particulars.

According to David Brown, theologian and author of God and Enchantment of Place, Christians have typically tried to prevent absolute claims about the sacredness of a particular place in two ways: symbolic geography (setting the place in question “against a place elsewhere which was treated as a symbolic standard”) and pilgrimage (“actually traveling to another place to see for themselves an alternative and better reality”) (162). Brown further explains that symbolic geography “is used to negotiate the transfer of one place to another, with the specifics of both not only retained but also enhanced. . . . Indeed, the attempt is made to bring it into one’s own time and place so that God can be experienced anew” (213). Symbolic geography has characterized much American spiritual geography, from John Winthrop’s “city on a hill” (which made the New World into a New Jerusalem) to slave spirituals in which the singers associated escape from the South with crossing the River Jordan. Again, such comparisons respect the particular
sacredness of the two places being compared, but it re-contextualizes the more familiar place within the larger perspective of sacred history.

Pilgrimage, as Brown explains, does not seek to incorporate Jerusalem into the believer’s experience, but rather allows the believer to bring his or her experiences to the actual city of Jerusalem. “Pilgrimage,” Brown writes,

is often treated by hostile critics as an overvaluing of the particular. What I want to suggest instead is that its symbolism exercises a dual critique, both of the place from which pilgrims have come and also, perhaps more surprisingly, of the goal towards which they travel, for even that place is now also seen as provisional in the divine dispensation. Yet at the same time all this does nothing to lessen the increased sentimentality given to both places, for it is precisely through place that such discoveries are made and God more fully known. (213)

Of course, an increasingly important feature of contemporary pilgrimage is the journey itself: the act of journeying may transform both the point of origin and the destination. As Philip Sheldrake points out, God, in the Old and New Testaments, often meets people “on the road”: the Angel wrestles with Jacob while he is on his way to meet his brother, the disciples encounter the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus, Saul/Paul has a conversion experience on the road to Damascus. Even though the pilgrimage’s destination may also be significant, it may be that “the marginal ground between fixed places is where God is most often encountered” (Spaces 34).

In addition to complicating the too easy dichotomy between fixity (in place) and movement (between places), spiritual geographers also challenge the distinction between
“religion” and “spirituality” common to both popular and academic conversation. Diane Quantic exemplifies this popular view when she writes, “the term ‘religious’ denotes an experience centered in a sacred context that has social as well as personal dimensions. The term ‘spiritual’ . . . connotes a more contemplative, personal experience” (63). For the writers I am studying, the distinction between corporate religion and personal, individual spirituality collapses, for they each stress the role of community in their spiritual experience of place. A more satisfactory definition of spirituality comes from Carolyn Osiek, who writes that it is “the experience, reflection and articulation of the assumptions and consequences of religious faith as it is lived in a concrete situation” (qtd. in Lane, Landscapes 10). Spirituality is not distinct from religion, but is rather the expression of the religious in the particular. I primarily abide by this definition in my study, though at times I may use the terms “spiritual” and “religious” interchangeably in order to emphasize how, for these writers, religion is found in the particulars.

Spiritual geographers especially tend to collapse the categories of “spiritual” and “religious” in their writing because they emphasize the importance of ritual in recognizing and defining sacred place. According to Belden Lane, “participation in ritual” is “what allows a site initially known to us as topos—a mere location, a measurable, quantifiable point, to become a place available to us as chora—an energizing force, suggestive to the imagination, drawing intimate connections to everything else in our lives” (Landscapes 39). Ritual, though it recognizes and allows us to participate in the presence of the divine, also allows us to construct narratives of spirituality and place.
Methodology

Theologians and geographers have already begun to theorize and map the deep relations between religion and place; my project is different because these prior attempts have primarily used an anthropological lens rather than a literary one. Furthermore, theorists authoring book-length studies of spiritual geography (and these writers have been predominantly male) have almost completely ignored writings by Kathleen Norris, who first popularized the term, and by other women poets, novelists, and essayists. However, three recent articles—Thomas Matchie’s “Spiritual Geography in Four Midwestern Novels,” Charles Mitchell’s “Reclaiming the Sacred Landscape: Terry Tempest Williams, Kathleen Norris, and the Other Nature Writing,” and Diane D. Quantic’s “Women’s Response to the Great Plains: Landscape as Spiritual Domain in Kathleen Norris and Sharon Butala”—have explored facets of women’s writings on spiritual geography. As a whole, these articles mostly focus on the similarities and contrasts between two or more women writers, seldom making larger arguments about the ties between religion, place, and gender. Any theorizing work about Norris, Williams, and others, typically limits itself to ecocritical analysis—an important perspective, but one to which we need to add in order to discuss the unique role of religion in these works.  

The strength of scholarship thus far written about spiritual geography is that almost all its scholars—particularly Belden Lane, Philip Sheldrake, Jamie Scott and Paul

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5 For example, Mitchell makes an insightful contribution when he contrasts Williams and Norris to earlier writers like John Muir, whose condemnation of human presence in the land reinforced a sacred/profane dichotomy. Mitchell writes, “Both Williams and Norris suggest that the experience of the sacred within a natural landscape depends on a history of interaction with that landscape, that human presence is a corequisite to rather than an inevitable corruption of that experience” (Mitchell 169). However, Mitchell, while emphasizing the importance of this particular history of interaction with the land, does not sufficiently discuss how Norris and Williams view their own religious traditions in this history. He does not explore beyond a generalized “spirituality” of the land.
Simpson-Housley, and Richard Francaviglia—recognize the importance of narrative to studies of religion and place. Many scholars are particularly interested in the relationship of religious narratives about place to claims of ownership over place. “Something important happened to me—or to my religion’s founders—here, and thus I need unlimited access to this place. It belongs to me as my spiritual heritage.” We hear this narrative-based argument not only about the various holy lands of the Middle East, but also about Native American tribal lands, family farms, and the spot where the Twin Towers once stood. Some scholars—David Chidester and Edward Linenthal, for example—even go so far as to claim that a place is sacred only if people fight over it. While this view is somewhat reductionistic, any study of spiritual geography must acknowledge that dominant cultures often use their narratives to trump another group’s claim to a sacred place.

Thus, though I am dealing with primarily white, middle-class, Christian writers, questions of race and class—as they relate to the privileges writers either address or take for granted—will play a role in my work. Because issues of spirituality and ownership are so intimately related to narrative, interdisciplinary work between religion and literature can play a key role in the study of place, as Wesley Kort argues: “At this ethical level ‘Religion and Literature’ work can, among other things, expose the pretensions to place involved in our narratives, can question our proprietary postures, and counter claims of possession with contrary narratives” (qtd. in Scott and Simpson Housley, xxiii).

Any study of narratives about religion and place must recognize the multiplicity of claims upon sacred place; it must “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable,” giving

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6 Journalist Peter Finley Dunne’s aphorism is often used to summarize the mission of Christ and those who follow his radical social teaching. In Chapter 7, “Precarity and Permanence: Dorothy Day and the Catholic
roots to the placeless and displacing the entrenched. Narratives may lay false claim to territory, but counternarratives can also disrupt those claims. Through stories and narratives, what seemed like a solid geographical boundary becomes fluid and permeable. As Michel de Certeau writes:

the story privileges a ‘logic of ambiguity’ through its accounts of interaction. It ‘turns’ the frontier into a crossing, and the river into a bridge. It recounts inversions and displacements: the door that closes is precisely what may be opened; the river is what makes passage possible; the tree is what marks the stages of advance; the picket fence is an ensemble of interstices through which one’s glances pass. . . .What the map cuts up, the story cuts across. (128-129)

In other words, any narrative “map” of spiritual geography is subject to challenge and revision. But, through stories, we also have the potential to link our spiritual geographies to those of others.

I limit my study to women writers of the Christian tradition—not because men and women of other religious traditions haven’t made valuable contributions to the genre of spiritual geography, but because it allows me to explore in depth one particular strain of religious experience with place. Limiting my dissertation to Christian women writers helps me to avoid the anthropological “people of this faith relate to place in this certain way, while people of another faith relate to place in another way” approach, which to this point has characterized many studies of spiritual geography. With Belden Lane, I believe that “[i]dentifying the sacred character of a place . . . involves much more than gathering

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Worker Sense of Place,” of Landscapes of the Sacred, in which Belden Lane writes that Day and her Workers “sought to give placement to those who were uprooted and to uproot those who were ensconced in overly-secure places” (189).

Francaviglia and Griffith, for example.
the random accounts of its individual spiritual encounters, significant as these may be. To experience a place as sacred is to participate, knowingly or unknowingly, in a whole history of cultural tensions and conflicting claims, even ecological shifts in the terrain itself” (Landscapes 3-4). Focusing on American Christian women writers will allow me to relate twentieth-century narratives to an established historical tradition of women’s writing—spiritual narrative—whose contemporary descendants have been underexplored critically. I hope that my work will inspire others to study African American, Latina, and other minority women writers whose spiritual narratives have been largely ignored.

We need more studies that tread the precarious ground where religion and feminism inform each other. In my dissertation, I first and foremost attempt to contribute to the understudied intersections between religion and feminism, as they are found in particular narratives of particular places. Several recent scholarly volumes have addressed the topic of ecofeminist spirituality, which certainly has relevance for my project. However, many ecofeminist scholars limit the scope of their work by failing to discuss how women committed to a particular religious tradition narrate their experience with “nature.” Much contemporary criticism assumes that “spirituality” entails merely a belief in the power and value of nature, rather than a commitment to particulars of place and faith. Scholars who have written specifically about Kathleen Norris and Terry Tempest Williams have used the lens of ecofeminism and have therefore focused more on women’s response to Nature—an approach that runs the risk of essentializing gendered perceptions—rather than on the particulars of these writers’ experiences and religious traditions. Moreover, many women writers experience the spirituality of place

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8 For example, Adams’ *Ecofeminism and the Sacred* and Low and Tremayne’s *Women as Sacred Custodians of the Earth?*. 
in more obviously constructed environments as well as in nature (though, along with Doreen Massey, Gillian Rose, and other feminist geographers, I question any rigid division between “nature” and “culture”); my project, therefore, will differ from previous studies in using the lens of “particularity” rather than “nature” or “architecture” to map women’s narratives of religion and place.

For women writers of spiritual geography, particularity is a central concept that helps them belong to a religious tradition while resisting the universalizing tendencies associated with patriarchy. As Carol J. Adams defines it, “patriarchal spirituality associates women, body, and nature, and then emphasizes transcending the body and transcending the rest of nature . . . [thereby making] oppression sacred” (1). A feminist spirituality, then, celebrates the particulars of the female body and of place (whether “natural” or “cultural”). For Christian women writers, particularity is especially important, because of the central Christian belief known as the “scandal of particularity”: the belief that God, in Jesus Christ, became incarnate in a particular time and place. According to Christian theology, God’s becoming human showed that God cares about the minutest of human experiences. Significantly, God chose to become part of an ostracized and oppressed people, the Jews under the Roman empire. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, a place central to the symbolic geography of Judaism because of its association with the Davidic line of kings, but because his parents were from Nazareth, and because he was raised there, he was primarily known as “Jesus of Nazareth”—a statement that would be roughly equivalent to calling him “Jesus of Hicktown, USA.”

In much contemporary spirituality, Christ’s Incarnation, which showed the value of the particular (even the disregarded particular), validates the particularity of all times and all

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9 See John 1:46, in which Nathanael asks, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”.
places, while celebrating each place’s uniqueness. Philip Sheldrake writes that incarnational place “is subversive in that it not only makes space for the particular but also makes space at the heart of each particular reality for what is other and more than itself” (*Spaces* 67).

Sheldrake also refers to incarnational place as “sacramental space” or, even more specifically, “Eucharistic place.” Clarification of these terms will shed further light on the meaning of “incarnational place.” Most Christians recognize at least two official church Sacraments (baptism and communion), holding forth the definition of sacrament as “a visible means of invisible grace” (though even this definition has different meanings among the many Christian denominations). However, Christian theology, while respecting the significance of church Sacraments, also believes that all of God’s creation can be sacramental (I use the lowercase to indicate “sacrament” in this broader sense): it can express something of God’s nature. Thus, as Christ reveals himself in the particulars of bread and wine, so too Christ chooses a kind of self-disclosure through the material reality of place. However, Sheldrake uses the term “Eucharistic space” to emphasize the importance of our participation in sacramental place, a participation that entails an “ethical and political price” (*Spaces* 74). If we respond ethically to sacramental place, Sheldrake argues, we strive to create a subversive community expressing the nature of

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10 See, for example, Chapter 3, “The Eucharist and Practising Catholic Place,” in Philip Sheldrake’s *Spaces for the Sacred*. Also, see Belden Lane’s analysis, in *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, of the differences between Judaism’s and Christianity’s approaches to the geography of Mount Sinai. Judaism emphasizes the symbolic importance of Sinai and is largely indifferent to its actual location, but, Lane argues, “Christianity’s attention to geographical detail in the iconography of Mount Sinai is unique. This may be due, in part, to the Christian emphasis upon the incarnation—its sacramental, materialistic fascination with icon and place.” However, he also concedes that this fascination with a more material spiritual geography may also reflect the need of post-Constantinian Christianity to establish an imperial religion celebrated at sacred sites after the pattern of Hellenistic culture” (*Solace* 113). However, according to the Christian incarnational theology, a tradition’s derivation from cultural particulars (be they Hellenistic or otherwise) does not render it unholy.
Christ. All emplaced Eucharistic communities therefore have the common feature of living in imitation of Christ; however, living according to Christ also means maintaining the unique qualities of each community and place. Therefore, “the Eucharist is a practice of resistance to any attempt to homogenize human places” (77).

Though, throughout history, Christianity’s relationship to place—and to the environment in particular—has been a conflicted one, the women writers I discuss share, for the most part, a sacramental and incarnational, if not explicitly Eucharistic, view of place.

**Scholarly Significance**

Particularity plays an important role not only in the religious viewpoint of my primary texts but also in much feminist criticism. Patriarchy has long devalued the particular as “provincial,” as women’s territory. In response, some feminists (mostly first- and second-wave) have responded by emphasizing women’s ability to break free from local, and particularly domestic, ties; this reaction, however, has sometimes exaggerated the local/global or stationary/mobile binaries, ignoring the ways in which, for both women and men, no place is truly isolated and no “universal” is without particular ties. Women writers of spiritual geography, on the other hand, embrace the particular because it leads to community-building, to love of one’s neighbor as one’s self—which, after all, is a major part of how Christians are supposed to gain knowledge of God. Therefore, I make use of feminist theory that stresses the importance of particular places, sometimes in response to feminist mobility theorists, such as Rosi Braidotti, who erase particularity through their insistence on de-placed nomadism as the ideal feminist stance. Braidotti and others display what Elizabeth Pritchard refers to as an “Enlightenment narrative of
development,” which “tells of an escape or exit from a locatedness that is deemed to be restrictive” (46). According to Pritchard, the problem with many feminist mobility theorists is that they assume that to “be enlightened, modern, and developed is to eschew all boundaries—boundaries bespeak backwardness” (47). Granted, a certain kind of naïve or reactionary emphasis on the particular can be dangerous, not only to women, but to the whole world: as Caren Kaplan notes, “Emergent fascisms, recurrent nationalisms, racisms, patriarchies, and fundamentalist religious/political movements signal the dangers of relying too heavily on the ideologies of the local” (62). In our post-9/11 world, however, we tend to focus too exclusively on the negative aspects of rootedness. Perhaps a greater understanding of how a spiritual relationship to place can empower women’s narratives will help to balance out our perceptions of the religious power of the local.

Geraldine Pratt, in critique of feminist mobility theory, argues that a close connection to real places can lead to vitality, rather than to provincialism. “If we have no sense of placement,” she writes, “we have no stake in places—both locally and globally (this is not a plea for parochialism)—and we have no reason to either preserve or change them” (20). She concludes that there are “serious reasons for reexamining the positive ethics of dwelling in place and for holding these in close tension with the rhetoric and romance of margins and mobility” (20). The language of spiritual geography does just this, for it embraces the rootedness of place at the same time that it uses metaphors of journey and mobility to describe the spiritual growth resulting from that rootedness. Writers like H.D., Kathleen Norris, and Lee Smith portray this increased rootedness as a paradoxical movement that leads to greater journeying. As their protagonists (fictional and non-fictional) trace their maternal spiritual heritage to a particular geographical spot,
they explore new ways of locating themselves in relation to religion. In the process, they find the boundaries between themselves and place, between themselves and others, between themselves and God, shifting and collapsing. For these writers, openness to place opens up the borders of the self. Some feminists have claimed that simply being a woman gives one more fluid boundaries between self and others; this belief, however, carries essentialist overtones. Inserting place into the equation—place, which women may tend to respond to in a particular way not because of biology, but because of historically and socially determined conditions—helps to explain the complex relationship between women, religion, and community.

If feminist geography needs to pay more attention to particular place, we also need more scholarship within religious studies that focuses on the growing importance of geography. In his 2002 review essay “Religion, Community, and Place: Locating the Transcendent,” Rhys H. Williams suggests that “religious geography is in many ways understudied (outside some attention to religious architecture). Perhaps,” he concludes, “this is a function of the classic history of American mobility, where no one space is so sacred that one cannot pack up and head to a new frontier. Perhaps this is a function of the United States being largely composed of Christians—a self-proclaimed ‘universalist’ religion that aims to bring its truth to all peoples in all lands, regardless of geography” (260-1). Despite the truth of Williams’s description of these characteristics of American Christianity, American Christian women have nevertheless begun to “place” their own religious tradition, grounding it through personal narratives which embody, at times resisting and at times embracing, a larger spiritual narrative.
Chapter Summaries

Chapter Two: Geographical Expatriation and Spiritual Re-Matriation in H.D.’s The Gift

I begin my exploration with one text in which the author/narrator does not actually make a physical journey to her maternal home, but rather re-lives her spiritual geography from a position of self-chosen expatriation. In this chapter, I explore the potentially liberating effects of “returning home” to a particular place and a particular spiritual tradition. H.D.’s seldom-read autobiographical novel presents her maternal home and spirituality (her mother’s ancestors were Moravians who settled in Pennsylvania, where H.D. grew up) as forces that allow her to persevere against the masculine impulses to violence that she viewed as responsible for World War II. I argue that The Gift can contribute to a new feminist understanding of “home”—not a static, closed-off, or patriarchal home, but rather a home in which the preservation of one’s own spiritual heritage enables connections to the world “outside” that home (and, in fact, this kind of home collapses distinctions between “inside” and “outside,” “past” and “present,” “mundane” and “transcendent”). However, I also acknowledge that H.D.’s attempt to connect her own history to that of other people groups was sometimes misguided, particularly in her choice to compare her own “exile” to that of the Jews. Therefore, this chapter also allows me to introduce the dissertation’s sub-theme of some spiritual geographers’ impulse to simultaneously exoticize and appropriate the spiritual experience of ethnic others—an impulse that is the greatest flaw among the writers I examine.

Chapter Three: “Placing” the Spiritual Metaphors of Kathleen Norris and Sue Monk Kidd
In Chapter Three, I explore more fully the role of particular place in women’s Christian spiritual geography. Immensely popular writer Sue Monk Kidd, in her “de-conversion narrative” *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter* and her novel *The Secret Life of Bees*, centers her narratives around particular places but at the same time de-emphasizes their particularity to make them into universal symbols of the “sacred feminine.” I argue that this universalizing impulse results in her stereotypical—and, in fact, racist—portrayal of African American women’s spirituality. In contrast, Kathleen Norris’s writing, particularly *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* acknowledges that her particular spiritual geography has a history of appropriation, as most American spiritual geography inevitably does, given this nation’s history of crimes against Native Americans and their land. Norris acknowledges and addresses the question of both spiritual and geographical appropriation, and though she does not arrive at any easy answers, we learn that her main lens for viewing the importance of place and cultural heritage arises from her belief in the Incarnation of Christ. I argue that the Incarnation, for Norris, functions as a kind of “thirdspace” (to use Edward Soja’s term for a place where two seeming opposites coexist) uniting the general and the particular, the earthly and the spiritual. In my discussion of Norris, I examine feminist understandings of the Incarnation, particularly Incarnational theology that emphasizes Mary’s role in bringing the divine into the world.

*Chapter Four: The Southern Pilgrim Malgré Lui in the Works of Flannery O’Connor and Lee Smith*
In between the general and the particular, there are of course numerous levels of geographical classification. In this chapter, I explore the role of regionalism in spiritual geography, particularly in the Southern writing of Flannery O’Connor and Lee Smith. Even today, “the South” is often assumed to be a more religious place than the “blue states” of the U.S. However, I want to argue against a regional determinism, while recognizing the formative role particular places can play in spirituality. The fine line between viewing region as formative and viewing it as deterministic parallels the role of God in O’Connor’s and Smith’s writing. Both of these writers feature female characters who are propelled on spiritual journeys by forces outside themselves (often a force associated with God) and thus become pilgrims malgré lui (pilgrims in spite of themselves). However, as becomes especially clear in Smith’s Saving Grace, this divine force is not domineering or patriarchal; rather, God leads these pilgrims to live more incarnate, emplaced (though not immobile) lives. Thus, Smith’s protagonist Florida Grace Shepherd, must journey through the body, specifically a maternal body, to find her spiritual home. Once again, an incarnational spiritual geography reaffirms both the role of place and the role of women’s bodies in showing forth the divine.

Chapter Five: Women’s Spiritual Geographies of the African Diaspora: Paule Marshall’s Praisesong for the Widow

This chapter continues the theme of spiritual geography among the oppressed, this time locating sacred geographies in the African diaspora. Since the publication of Paul Gilroy’s The Black Atlantic, literary scholars have been tracing out the diasporic elements of fiction by contemporary African American women writers. However, due in part to
Gilroy’s devaluation of both roots and religion, scholars have neglected exploration of the “routed” elements of religion in the black diaspora. Examining the portrayal of roots, routes, and religion in Paule Marshall’s 1983 novel *Praisesong for the Widow*, we discover that religion is connected both to a remote place of origin and to the various diasporic places that Marshall’s protagonist Avey both visits and dwells in. Most important of all, Avey experiences both the roots and routes of religion in her own body, as she increasingly comes to value her own flesh. Read in conjunction with *The Black Atlantic* and with feminist mobility theory, *Praisesong for the Widow* significantly complicates our assumptions about home, religion, and privilege.

*Chapter Six: The Spiritual Geography of the Cloister*

As Jenny Franchot’s *Roads to Rome* details, antebellum Protestants delighted in macabre fantasies of what really went on behind convent walls. Their prurient fascination culminated in the burning of an Ursuline convent in Boston in 1834, and the subsequent publication of several convent “tell-all” narratives. While American Protestants speculated about the nuns, English diarist Frederick Maryat speculated about the Americans, particularly about how the convent burning could occur in “a country where all forms of religion are tolerated.” The most convincing explanation? “The majority of the mob were influenced more by curiosity than any other feeling. The Convent was sealed to them, and they were determined to know what was in it” (qtd. in Franchot 137).

Since about 1990, American presses have once again been flooded with books about convents, monasteries, and what goes on inside them. Through both fiction and memoir, contemporary women writers have ventured imaginatively – and in person – into
gender-specific sacred spaces, into the cloister. Is this contemporary move simply more of the same semi-voyeuristic urge that drove nineteenth-century anti-Catholics? Or is it an attempt to retreat from the gaze of men, to find oneself more authentically in a spiritual community that values solitude? Or is it a blind, misguided grasping at comfortable walls that will ultimately close in on the self – and exclude others?

The cloister carries with it histories of both repression and liberation, and this paradox itself draws spiritual seekers. As Esther de Waal writes of paradox in Benedictine monasticism, “This polarity, this holding together of opposites, this living with contradictions, presents us not with a closed system but with a series of open doors. . . We find that we have to make room for divergent forces within us, and that there is not necessarily any resolution of the tension between them” (Living with Contradiction 22-3). Contemporary American women writers such as Louise Erdrich, Patricia Hampl, Toni Morrison, Kathleen Norris, and Kristin Ohlson are challenging the cloister’s boundaries and finding that, in turn, the space of the cloister challenges the boundaries of the self – the dividing lines between self and other, as well as between person and place. I explore the role of convents in these recent writings, bringing in insights – as well as challenges – from both theology and contemporary feminist mobility theory. In mapping the spiritual geography of the cloister, I find that it is impossible to completely pin down, but its paradoxes and its resistance to monolithic explanation are some of the features that make it such a fascinating location for women writers.

Epilogue: Whither the Spiritual Geography of the City?
In these concluding pages, I briefly explore the question of why Christian narratives of spiritual geography have been so reluctant to ground themselves in the terrain of America’s cities. I consider the potential effects, for both feminism and religion, of giving greater attention to urban spiritual geography in works by women writers. Finally, I proffer the story of Dorothy Day as an example of how tracing narratives of urban spiritual geography can remap the city itself.
Figure 1. The U.S. Presidential Election of 2000

Figure 2. Religious Adherents as a Percentage of All U.S. Residents, 2000

http://www.valpo.edu/geomet/pics/geo200/religion/adherents.gif
Chapter 2

Geographical Expatriation and Spiritual Re-matriation in H.D.’s *The Gift*

During one of H.D.’s psychoanalytic sessions with Freud in the 1930s, the sessions that she credited with enabling her to write *The Gift*, she recovered a memory of a childhood incident during a shopping trip with her mother and brother. Her brother had plopped down on the curb outside a store and refused to budge. He told their mother that he was going off to live by himself, and that he was going to take his sister Hilda (H.D.) with him. As the adult H.D. continues recounting the story in *Tribute to Freud*, she transforms the anecdote from her own personal experience into a myth that “appears variously in Greek tragedies . . . and it can be found in your original Grimm’s tales or in your nursery translation, called Little-Brother, Little Sister” (*TF* 29). What happens in this repeated pattern differs according to the perspective of brother or sister: “And their mother has walked away. *He* knows that she will come back because he is older and is admittedly his mother’s favorite. But *she* does not know this. . . . it has not even occurred to her that she might throw her small weight into the balance of conventional behavior by following her mother and leaving her brother to his fate” (*TF* 29).

This single childhood anecdote not only becomes part of an ages-old, world-wide myth, according to H.D. and Freud, but it also serves as an emblem of H.D.’s evolving place in relation to her male expatriate associates. During H.D.’s childhood, she felt neglected to some degree by her mother, who gave preferential treatment to H.D.’s two brothers. H.D. often associated her ambivalent and sometimes jealous feelings towards her brothers with her emotional responses to Ezra Pound, the expatriate American poet to
whom she had once been engaged. Like the brother from H.D.’s childhood memory, Pound threatened to leave home—and did, abandoning America for Europe. H.D., consistent with her role in the Little-Brother, Little-Sister myth, followed in his footsteps soon after. She stuck with her “brother,” leaving her mother behind. It wasn’t until later in life, after her psychoanalytic treatment with Freud and during the terror of World War II, that H.D. began to consider the option of following her mother home.

*The Gift*, the mystical autobiographical novel H.D. composed between 1941 and 1943, recounts this journey home, though at this point her return was spiritual rather than physical: she remained in London, but from that location, she began to remember and retrace her mother’s religious heritage of Moravianism, as perceived through H.D.’s perceptions of her childhood home in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. *The Gift* begins with H.D. recounting a World War II air raid from her London flat, but the narrative quickly moves back to her recollections of her home turf in Bethlehem and Upper Darby, Pennsylvania. Her childhood memories (as well as “memories” of things she never experienced herself) include supernatural experiences that take place within the familial home, but which transcend time and place. The older narrator H.D. finds a hope for reconciliation across cultures as, towards the end of *The Gift*, she recalls and participates in her maternal grandmother’s mystical re-living of a peaceful exchange between Moravians and Native Americans that had occurred centuries earlier. This return of her repressed maternal heritage, the “gift” of the title, helps H.D. to face the future. The harmonious transfer of identity between her immigrant ancestors and the Native Americans gives her hope that war-drawn boundaries may be transcended again. The
expatriate found escape from her fellow male expatriates and from what she viewed as
the masculine impulse toward war by returning home to a maternal place and spirituality.

In feminist theory of the past twenty years, “home” has seldom appeared as a
liberating notion. Rather, it is the primary site of patriarchal repression. It is also,
according to many feminists, a closed-off place, a place founded upon the exclusion of
the other. In Biddy Martin and Chandra Mohanty’s famous 1986 article “What’s Home
Got to Do with It?” , home is defined as “an illusion of coherence and safety based on the
exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences
even within oneself” (196). Home implies a stable, fixed identity; therefore, for feminists
like Rosi Braidotti, author of 1994’s Nomadic Subjects, the “nomad” is a more
appropriate metaphor for the postmodern subject. The theoretical nomad is a free-
roaming subject, moving fluidly between different locales, occupying different positions
based on their political usefulness at the moment.

Yet there are problems with using the nomad (or the exile) as a poster-child for
escape from masculine-dominated identity. For one thing, women may associate home
with the empowering influence of their mothers (or they may even have found their
fathers to be a nurturing influence as well). Furthermore, real nomads and exiles often
desire home at the same time that they know it is an illusion. “Home” is more complex
than some feminist mobility theorists want to acknowledge. A more fruitful approach
towards a feminist geography of home is that advocated by Sophia McClennen.
McClennen points out the theoretical construction of the nomad not only ignores
grounded, historical particularities, but also operates according to a binary logic
(home=ideological stasis; no-home=freedom, flexibility). Instead, McClennen suggests,
“the space of exile is both a condition of confinement and of limitless movement. . . . [exiled writers] construct versions of cultural identity which are ‘lost in space,’ neither wholly national nor transnational, not completely territorialized nor deterritorialized” (209). Though H.D. writes as an expatriate-by-choice and not an exile, and the differences of these circumstances do need to be taken into account, I would argue that these same tensions characterize the spiritual geography of *The Gift*.

In many ways, *The Gift* creates a place in which binaries of motion/stasis, of material/spiritual, and of universal/particular break down. H.D. refers to this multilocal, heterotopic place as both house and cathedral: “It is really the Cathedral that is all-important. Inside the Cathedral we find regeneration or reintegration. . . . The house is home, the house is the Cathedral. . . . The house in some indescribable way depends on father-mother. At the point of integration or regeneration, there is no conflict over rival loyalties” (*TF* 146). H.D.’s combination of cathedral and house shows how crucial spirituality—a gendered spirituality—was for her notion of home. Cathedral architecture depends on tension for the building to stand: tension that does not tear apart, but rather allows for multiple contradictions to dwell in the same space. In this way, H.D.’s home-Cathedral functions as a “thirdspace,” geographer Edward Soja’s term for a place that breaks down binaries:

*Everything* comes together in Thirdspace: subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history. (56-57)
Thirdspace, in contrast to theoretical nomadism, makes room for acknowledging the particular circumstances that lead to simultaneous mobility and stasis. Reading H.D.’s *The Gift* as a thirsrdspace, as a simultaneous escape from home and a longing to return home, helps to illuminate the role of “home” in spiritual geography—in a more complex way than simply associating home with patriarchal versions of Christianity.

However, I hope that reading *The Gift* critically for the places where it fails to achieve “thirdspace”—where binaries of universal and particular begin to reassert themselves—will also shed light on some of the problems with theoretical nomadism. As McClennen argues, “without history and politics, exile is a condition that has no meaning. To strip the exile of history and celebrate displacement is to glorify the experience” (63). As we see in H.D.’s post-war writing, glorifying the experience of exile and diaspora results in her appropriation and misuse of another people’s—the Jews’—experience. Though H.D., as an expatriate, left home geographically and embraced a “marginal” identity, she did so through appropriating the experience of Jews (when it was useful to her), while at the same time expressing anti-Semitism in her writing. Had she allowed the particularity of her own marginal Moravian heritage to stand on its own ground, so to speak, she might have more fully respected the particularity of other spiritual traditions.

The persistence of similar misappropriation of mobile experience can be seen in feminist theory and writing today, which is one reason re-examining *The Gift* is so important. Though Rosi Braidotti is not the only feminist to use the experience of nomads and exiles without regard to their historical and material conditions, the fact that she continued *Nomadic Subjects*’ overriding metaphor in her most recent book,
Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics (2006)—without significantly responding to criticisms of “nomadism” as a theoretical construct—signals that metaphors of mobility still need to be opened up to a feminist “trialectics.”

Through examining H. D.’s complex portrayal of exile and of the return home (which are not necessarily separate stages of her journey) in The Gift and other writings of the period, feminists may gain a more nuanced vision of religion, gender, and home than the 19th-century version we often envision. However, in H. D.’s work, we also see a warning sign, especially for Western feminists who claim marginality by appropriating the experience of truly marginalized and suffering people.

Expatriation and the Freedom of Confined Space

H.D. biographer Barbara Guest attributes the beginning of H.D.’s expatriation to her sense of having failed her family’s expectations: she had dropped out of Bryn Mawr, and she had developed close relationships with two individuals of whom the Doolittles disapproved, Ezra Pound and, later, Frances Gregg. A key motivation in H.D.’s initial departure for Europe was her need to figure out what exactly was going on in her relationship with Ezra Pound, who had left for Europe in 1908. The pair had been on-again-off-again engaged for several years. H.D. was also struggling with newfound feelings for Frances Gregg, her first female love. Gregg enabled H.D.’s initial European venture: she and her mother arranged to take H.D. there with them. What began as a holiday expanded, for H.D., into a lifetime divided mostly between London and Switzerland.
However, H.D. seldom credited Gregg for her introduction to Europe. H.D. was more concerned with the role of her “brother” figure, the figure who refused to go home and yet, at the same time, stayed put. In H.D.’s writing, she always portrayed Pound as the catalyst for her expatriation, whether for good or ill. The ambivalence of her feelings about Pound’s role is clear: she wrote that Pound was “the jolt” that got her out of a “groove” and led to a new life in Europe (Guest 7), and yet, in End to Torment, one of her last published works, she writes, almost wistfully, “I was separated from my friends, from my family, even from America, by Ezra” (ET 35). Most importantly for H.D’s later writing, she viewed him as having separated her from her mother. As mentioned earlier, she associated him psychologically-mythically with her older brother, her mother’s favorite. Her biological brother was Helen Doolittle’s favorite, and Pound seemed to her to be the Mother-Muse’s favorite. Again in End to Torment, she writes,

Thinking of Ezra’s work, I recall my long Helen sequence. Perhaps, there was always a challenge to his creative power. Perhaps, even, as I said to Erich, there was unconscious—really unconscious—rivalry. My older brother was my mother’s favorite; I, my father’s. But the mother is the Muse, the Creator, and in my case especially, as my mother’s name was Helen. (41)

However, in the end, Helen, both Helen Doolittle and the Muse, frees H.D. of the burden of rivalry with brother-Ezra. She writes about recalling painful memories of her early years of shared creativity in London with Ezra, “This is not easy,” but then after a paragraph break, she continues on to say, “Or it is easy enough in terms of Helen and Achilles [her original title for her long poem Helen in Egypt], my own 1952, 1953, 1954
'cants’” (ET 48). Helen in Egypt was her direct response to Pound’s own cantos, and the long poem also accomplished a feminist revision of the story of the Trojan War: Helen is no longer Helen “of Troy” but rather Helen “in Egypt,” the home she later adopted. Though it could be seen as a celebration of expatriation, Helen in Egypt was also at the same time H.D.’s representation, in poetic form, of the return to her mother and her maternal heritage. Helen in Egypt, therefore, was the poetic expression of the movement H.D. had begun in her psychoanalytic sessions with Freud and in the writing of The Gift. With these works, she followed her mother and the Muse, her own Muse, leaving Pound sitting behind on the curb.

Pound, however, was not pleased about H.D.’s turn from his influence to Freud’s and the mother’s. Though he had abandoned Imagism11, the movement which crystallized around his and H.D.’s early poems, for Vorticism12 and later Fascism, he could not as easily accept changes in H.D.’s aesthetic. When he learned of her interest in Freudian psychoanalysis, he wrote to her, “Have felt yr/ vile Freud all bunk . . . / You got into the wrong pig stye, ma chere. But not too late to climb out” (qtd. in Chisholm 94). Pound would have preferred that H.D. remain the passive, almost invisible subject of Imagist poetry, rather than the prophetess of her later poems.

11 H.D. herself wrote, in her early autobiographical novel Paint It Today, of feeling betrayed when Pound abandoned her and, with her, Imagism: “She had parted with the youth, having gained nothing from him but a feeling that someone had tampered with an oracle, had banged on a temple door, had dragged out small, curious, sacred ornaments, had not understood their inner meaning, yet with a slight sense of their inner value, their perfect tint and carving, had not stolen them, but left them, perhaps worse, exposed by the roadside, reft from their shelter and their holy setting” (qtd. in Robinson 40).

12 Zach explains Pound’s fascination with Vorticism in terms of mobility: “the Vorticist insistence on movement, energy and intensity, a universal trait of pre-war (Bergson-inspired) art, strengthened Pound’s conviction that the ‘permanent’ or ‘absolute’ image-complex-juxtaposition must be active rather than static or fixed—as Gautier’s, H.D.’s and Aldington’s word-sculpture had often tended to be” (qtd. in Benstock 330).
Pound reminded H.D. not only of her brother, but also of her father. The same passage in which she wrote of recalling Pound, “This is not easy,” she first writes:

To recall Ezra is to recall my father.

To recall my father is to recall the cold, blazing intelligence of my ‘last attachment’ of the war years in London. (ET 48)

H.D. associated Charles Doolittle, the professor of astronomy, with scientific rationalism that kept her creativity bound. Again, H.D. wrote of Pound that he gave her “the jolt that got me out of the University groove, set me with my face toward Europe, eventually led to my staying in London” (qtd. in Guest 7). However, the “groove” in which H.D. was stuck in America was not entirely, as Susan Stanford Friedman argues, the “web of conventional feminine obligations, a domesticity that was incompatible with her creativity” (“Exile” 92), but rather the academic world associated with H.D.’s professor father. Charles Doolittle’s world was a highly mobile one geographically: the Doolittle family’s move, when H.D. was nine years old, from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, to Upper Darby, a suburb of Philadelphia, occurred because of Professor Doolittle’s change of institutional affiliation.

In fact, in The Gift, the child Hilda often associates the house, as well as the change from one house to another, with the men in her family. H.D. might have been fleeing domesticity when she followed Pound to Europe, but it was a paternal domesticity, one she associated with physical movement but with ideological stagnancy. H.D. linked her father spiritually with the rigidity of his Puritan ancestors: she writes, “He comes from those Puritan fathers who wear high peaked hats in the Thanksgiving number of magazines. They fought with the Indians and burned witches” (TF 34)—in
other words, exhibiting the intolerance H.D. saw as the root of violence. H.D. sets up an implicit contrast between the Puritans’ treatment of Native Americans, and the Moravians’ harmonious relations with them. H.D. viewed herself as having to struggle with her internalization of her father’s “cold, blazing intelligence” and narrowness before she could inherit her maternal gift of mystical imagination and empathy. This, Freudian psychology helped her to do.

In a letter to Bryher, H.D. reported another insight from one of her sessions with Freud: the discovery that “an empty house with no boys and a piano is apparently my UNK [unconscious] ideal” (qtd. in Guest 17). H.D. longed not for escape from domestic spaces, but for a house in which she would truly feel at home—one with no boys, with no rivals for her mother’s attention. Read through the lens of *The Gift*, this one image of the boyless, musical house reveals much about the quest underlying H.D.’s expatriation and re-matriation. In the 1941 work, H.D. associates the piano with her mother, Helen Wolle Doolittle, and with her mother’s mother, Elizabeth Weiss Wolle (whom the young Hilda knows as “Mamalie”), and with her creative and spiritual inheritance from them. As even the child narrator of *The Gift* realizes, having a piano in the house when boys are also present leads to problems because the boys, rather than the girls, are taught to play it. Contemplating her Uncle Fred’s musical talent, the young Hilda recognizes that its source lies in her own mother, who had been partially responsible for raising Fred. Frustrated with her own apparent lack of giftedness, Hilda asks, “But where did he get the Gift, just like that? Why didn’t Mama wait and teach us music like she did Uncle Fred when he was a little boy? Mama gave all her music to Uncle Fred, that is what she did”
(Gift 43). The transmission of the Gift seems stuck, motionless. However, H.D. finds, it is still moving, even in seemingly confined spaces.

Hilda later gains knowledge of the Gift when alone in the attic with Mamalie—no boys there—and a piano (actually, in this case, a spinet) once again becomes involved in the Gift’s transmission. In the attic, Mamalie tells Hilda the tale of how she and her first husband discovered documents describing an eighteenth-century meeting between Moravians and Native Americans at Wunden Eiland (Island of Wounds, a name echoing the importance of Christ’s crucifixion wounds in Moravian theology). As H.D. recounts the event, a sort of spiritual union occurred between the Indians and the Moravians, with much singing in many languages. Some of the Native American invocations used at the ceremony had been recorded by John Christopher Pyrlaeus, and these scores were among the documents found a century later by Mamalie and her husband. Mamalie, a gifted musician, unravels Pyrlaeus’s musical puzzle, not only following the “outer promptings” but also piercing “through to the inner meanings” (Gift 168). As a result, Mamalie has a supernatural experience in which, across time, she actually becomes a participant in the Wunden Eiland ceremony and speaks in tongues herself. This is the Gift, the secret maternal inheritance available to H.D.

Once again, though, a man within the house gets in the way of the Gift’s circulation. In the next chapter, occurring a couple of years later in chronology but closely related in significance, H.D.’s father arrives at his front door with a mysterious head wound, weakened and unable to speak. It is the child Hilda who brings him inside, though she is almost immediately forgotten in the uproar that ensues when the rest of the
household discovers him. The adult-narrator H.D. traces her years of feeling un-Gifted back to this one moment of her father’s wounding:

I, the child was still living but I was not free, not free to express my understanding of the Gift, until long afterwards. I was not in fact, completely free until again there was the whistling of evil wings, the falling of poisonous arrows, the deadly signature of a sign of evil-magic in the sky.

The same fear (personal fear) could crack the wall that had originally covered me over, because to live, I had to be frozen in myself—so great was the shock to my mind, when I found my father wounded.

(Gift 166)

It is not until H.D. is once again confined in a space similar to that of Mamalie’s attic—this time, the London flat within whose walls she and her partner Bryher had to remain during air raids—that her mind is free to roam with the Gift, to free herself from the frozenness of the father and return home to her creative and empathetic maternal inheritance.

“He Is Midwife to the Soul”\textsuperscript{13}: Coming Home to the Mother, Through Freud

H.D. herself attributed her return to maternal roots during World War II to a process begun more than ten years before, in yet another enclosed space: Sigmund Freud’s study in Vienna. From March through May of 1933 and again in October and November of 1934, H.D. met with Freud for psychoanalytic sessions paid for by Bryher. Great affection and respect formed between analyst and analysand, though not without

\textsuperscript{13} TF 116.
disagreements. In fact, one of their points of contention arose when H.D. revealed to Freud that she associated him with her mother (Friedman, Analyzing 69)\textsuperscript{14}. He would have preferred that she transfer to him as a father-figure rather than a maternal one. H.D. attributed the association with her mother in part to the fact that “the Professor himself was an Austrian, a Moravian actually by birth” (\textit{TF} 33) and thus from the same geographical area as her maternal ancestors. Freud, because of his geographical origins and because of his emphasis on her mother during psychoanalytic sessions, helped to steer H.D. toward home. In \textit{Tribute to Freud}, she writes:

I felt that to meet him at forty-seven, and to be accepted by him as analysand or student, seemed to crown all my other personal contacts and relationships, justify all the spiral-like meanderings of my mind and body. I had come home, in fact. And another poem comes inevitably to prompt me:

\begin{quote}
\textit{On desperate seas long wont to roam,}
\textit{Thy hyacinth hair, thy classic face,}
\textit{Thy Naiad airs, have brought me home}
\textit{To the glory that was Greece}
\textit{And the grandeur that was Rome.} (44)
\end{quote}

She then explains, “This is, of course, Edgar Allan Poe’s much-quoted Helen, and my mother’s name was Helen” (44). H.D’s lifelong fascination with Greece, which she

\textsuperscript{14} H.D. to Bryher, March 10, 1933: “My TRANSFERENCE seems to have taken place and what is it? . . . papa is a sort of old Beaver [Helen Doolittle]. Isn’t that odd? . . . He said he suspected it, then he said, in the best small-dog [Bryher] manner, ‘but—to be perfectly frank with YOU—I do not like it—I feel so very, very, very MASCULINE!’ He says he always feels hurt when his analysands have a maternal transference.”
viewed as a place that nurtured her spiritually\textsuperscript{15}, now gained grounding through its connection with her mother and with her original home in Pennsylvania.

On the surface, it seems somewhat strange that Freud led to H.D.’s sense of reunion with her maternal inheritance, because he believed her feelings about her mother were unhealthy: her psychoanalytic sessions with Freud often focused on what he classified as her “mother fixation.” According to Freud, H.D. fit into a pattern he assigned to all homosexually oriented women: as young children, they, like all girls, had come to recognize that they lacked a penis. Freud believed that, at this moment of realizing their own “castration,” “normal” girls transferred their affection to their fathers. Homosexual women were those who had not made this transition, but rather had remained fixated on their mothers, for whom all later female lovers were a substitution. Though H.D. resisted Freud’s theory of castration, she accepted his suggestions about her mother fixation (though without viewing her bisexual orientation as pathological). She wrote to Bryher, “Back to the womb seems to be my only solution” (qtd. in Robinson 279), implying that she was concerned that she tended towards infantile regression in the face of adversity.\textsuperscript{16}

For H.D., the solution was not rejection of the mother and embrace of the father, but union of the two: she sought a “thirdspace” that incorporated both male and female. Though H.D. credited Freud with bringing her home to her mother, she did not believe that Freud functioned in her psychoanalysis as a mother-substitute alone. In \textit{Tribute to Freud}, she includes the following caveat: “The Professor’s surroundings and interests

\textsuperscript{15} After H.D. gave birth to her daughter Perdita in 1919, she wrote of Bryher’s promise to take care of her: “she would take me to a new world, a new life, to the land, spiritually of my predilection, geographically of my dreams. We would go to Greece” (qtd. in Robinson 153).

\textsuperscript{16} In fact, H.D.’s fear of another war looming in Europe, and the fear that she would suffer mental breakdown as she did during World War I, was one of the major reasons she sought treatment with Freud.
seem to derive from my mother rather than from my father, and yet to say the
‘transference’ is to Freud as mother does not altogether satisfy me” (146). And, of course, the playful nickname she and Bryher used to refer to Freud was “Papa.” Freud did not stand in for H.D.’s mother or her father exclusively; rather, he allowed H.D. to claim her creative inheritance by uniting the two (a concept that may have particularly appealed to her bisexual identity). She particularly associated the productive joining of mother and father, though it occurred in psychoanalytic sessions, with the image of a house. In *Tribute to Freud,* she writes, as previously quoted, “The house in some indescribable way depends on father-mother. At the point of integration or regeneration, there is no conflict over rival loyalties” (146). This “house,” she writes, “is home, the house is the Cathedral” (146). “It is really the Cathedral that is all-important. Inside the Cathedral we find regeneration or reintegration” (146). Here images of domestic space and sacred space coincide in a metaphor for the healing powers of psychoanalysis itself—a metaphor, however, that also dominates the spiritual experience recounted in *The Gift.*

Despite this continuity between H.D.’s psychoanalysis and her rediscovery of her spiritual roots, she would also find that she most ardently diverged from Freud when it came to issues of gender and religion. When, during a psychoanalytic session, she described to Freud the Moravian custom of lighting candles at church on Christmas Eve, Freud responded, “There is no more significant symbol than a lighted candle. You say you remember your grandfather’s Christmas Eve service? The girls as well as the boys had candles?” (*TF* 124). As she tells of this episode in *Tribute to Freud,* H.D. writes that she at first thought “it seemed odd that he should ask this.” Interpreted in the light of
Freud’s obsession with female “castration,” however, as H.D. knew, the candle is clearly a phallic symbol. As such, Freud’s next comment seems especially noxious: “If every child had a lighted candle given, as you say they were given at your grandfather’s Christmas Eve service, by the grace of God, we would have no more problems . . . That is the true heart of all religion” (124). Penis envy is the root of all problems? And remedying penis envy is the heart of all religion? H.D., with her female-centered spirituality, would have had trouble agreeing to this suggestion.

H.D. and Freud most often clashed over her faith in the supernatural aspects of religion, and it was due to this conflict that she associated him with her rationalist, scientist father. Freud had little patience for H.D.’s interest in astrology and other mystical beliefs; when he was interested in religion, it was as myth, as the cultural backdrop that individual psyches mirrored. Thus, his famous work Moses and Monotheism reinterprets the biblical tale of the exodus from Egypt as a classic tale of “the slaying of the primeval father” (Yerushalmi 21). When he deals with religion, he must limit its deepest concerns to male fears and anxieties.

Freud’s and H.D.’s mutual obsession with Moses revealed further differences between the two, differences with significant implications for the gendered spiritual geography of The Gift. While in Vienna, H.D. dreamed of a princess descending a staircase with water at its foot, in which floats a basket with a baby inside. The dreamer watches this whole scene unseen, but is emotionally invested in the outcome: “The Princess must find the baby. I know that she will find this child. I know that the baby will

17 In one psychoanalytic session, Freud shows H.D. a statue of Pallas Athena and then tells her, “She is perfect, only she has lost her spear” (TF 70, italics original). In that moment, H.D. tells us, “I did not say anything,” but a few paragraphs later she launches into the most famous anti-Semitic passage from Tribute to Freud—perhaps a twisted form of “revenge” on her part.

18 To accomplish this, Freud has to invent a legend that the Israelites murdered Moses after leaving Egypt.
be protected and sheltered by her and that is all that matters” (TF 37). To both H.D. and Freud, this dream’s connection to the biblical tale of the infant Moses being found in the bulrushes by the Pharaoh’s daughter were obvious. However, the dream’s interpretation was less clear. H.D. questions her own identity within this dream. “Am I, perhaps, the child Miriam?” she asks, aligning herself with Moses’ sister, who watched as Moses was plucked from the water. “Or am I, after all, in my fantasy, the baby? Do I wish myself, in the deepest unconscious or subconscious layers of my being, to be the founder of a new religion?” (37). Freud himself encouraged this latter interpretation as he returned repeatedly to the dream in his sessions with H.D. In Advent, H.D. writes, “But the Professor insisted I myself wanted to be Moses; not only did I want to be a boy but I wanted to be a hero. He suggested my reading Otto Rank’s Der Mythus von der Geburt des Helden [The Myth of the Birth of the Hero]” (TF 120).

Rank’s work reveals much about how Freud would have wished H.D. to interpret her Moses dream and therefore much about what H.D. reacted against in her own version of the Moses story. Rank, an early pupil of Freud’s, published The Myth of the Birth of the Hero in 1914. The essay traces the development of the common tale of the hero abandoned at birth, saved by miraculous intervention, who then grows up to take revenge upon his father. Rank places Moses within a line of heroes including Sargon, Oedipus, Siegfried, and Jesus, pointing out how the Moses story uses doubling to separate and externalize the “bad” father figure (Pharaoh) from the “good” father (Amram, Moses’ biological father). With this revision in place, Moses can carry out revenge in good Oedipal style without threatening his biological father. Rank, heavily drawing upon but

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19 Rank interprets the tale of Christ’s birth in a similar light, viewing King Herod as a substitute “bad” father.
also at points challenging Freud, interprets this cycle of myths as an expression of a universal human (male) longing to rebel against one’s father. H.D., reading the text, would have merely found reinforcement of Freud’s thesis that she was stuck in the pre-Oedipal stage, wishing to be male, wishing to be the hero who could kill his father and marry his mother.

H.D., however, was pursuing her own “Moses” reading at the time of her analysis with Freud. In a letter dated March 4, 1933, H.D. asked Bryher to send her a copy of Leonora Eyles’s 1929 novel _Shepherd of Israel_ so that she could re-read it (Friedman, _Analyzing_ 45). Five days later, H.D. wrote, “‗Shepherd’ has come, thanks so much, it links up so well with my late-found Moses fantasy!” (Analyzing 67). The book was clearly important to H.D. at this time, though its sentimental prose bears little resemblance to her own. Perhaps she was so desperately looking for support in her interpretation of her Moses dream, as opposed to Freud’s interpretation, that she was willing to overlook the novel’s stylistic flaws. Though the British writer Eyles was best known as a feminist writer, thanks to her pro-birth-control manual _Commonsense about Sex_ (1934), _Shepherd of Israel_ does not share the feminist focus of her other works. Yet it helped H.D. to stand her ground against Freud, establishing her maternal spirituality as legitimate, rather than purely pathological.

As was consistent with his recommendation of Rank’s work, Freud wished to steer H.D. towards an interpretation that linked her dream with early childhood events in the life of an oedipal hero. H.D.’s request for the Eyles novel, however, suggests that she may have been interested in other aspects of the Moses tale, for _Shepherd of Israel_ begins its narrative when Moses is already an adult. H.D. had asked herself, in response to her
dream, if she longed to be the founder of a religion; Eyles portrays Moses as crafting a new religion—drawn from Egyptian and Hebrew origins, but imbued with his own emphasis (Eyles’ emphasis too, we might surmise) on the godlike dignity of each individual human being—believing that religion is the only uniting force strong enough to keep the Israelites together long enough to return to their promised homeland of Canaan.

H.D. would also have resonated with *Shepherd of Israel*’s emphasis on the experience of exile. At the beginning of the novel, Moses, raised as an Egyptian prince by Pharaoh’s daughter, learns of his true birth and, after slaying an Egyptian priest, flees to the desert, where he wanders, “a man without a land” (46), an expatriate. However, in his wanderings, he finds himself drawn to the tomb of Jacob, ancestor of all the Israelites in Egypt. “If a man can draw curtains in his being,” Eyles writes, “shutting off all of his life from birth, he finds a leading from some time more ancient than the day that began his little span of life. Perhaps some seed of his remote ancestors, planted in the heart of his heart, flowers when the noisy frettings of life give place to serene acceptance” (57). Under this influence, Moses begins a spiritual journey “home,” farther back than the childhood incidents Freud would find so significant, back to the ancestors he has just discovered as his own. Like H.D., he resists and revises the faith of his ancestors, but finds the return home—both spiritually and geographically—essential to developing the strength necessary for the tasks ahead.

In Moses’ case, that task is to lead the Israelites to Canaan, to the homeland promised to Jacob’s grandfather Abraham. Though neither he nor they have ever seen Canaan, they envision this journey as a return home, because of their ancestral ties.
Moses finds, however, that the Israelites, having been denied dignity as slaves in Egypt, are unprepared for the responsibilities of freedom: thus his creation of the Law during the years that the Israelites wander in the desert. Near the end of the journey, as they are nearing Canaan, Moses reflects on the difficulties of creating a stable community: “Are all Israelites wanderers at heart?” he asks. His conversation partner replies, “Wanderers and fighters both. When they find a home they wander from it into strange lands, and are never content until they get back again, only to find that even then it never satisfies them” (Eyles 298). This is the ancestral heritage to which Moses returns, a highly mobile one. Moses, of course, dies before reaching the Promised Land, so he is spared the experience of this dilemma in the literal Canaan. However, as an expatriate—or perhaps exile—from both Egypt and the Promised Land, at home in both and neither, he no doubt was a figure with whom H.D. could sympathize. And, like H.D., he dies not in the home of his ancestors, but with his eyes fixed firmly towards it.

In Eyles’s novel, ancestral religion, even when not wholeheartedly embraced, brings Moses and the Israelites “home,” or at least as close as they will ever come to experiencing home. For H.D., too, religion was a force that could bring her home, because it could, even more completely than psychoanalysis, unite father and mother, male and female.

“Baptized Moravian”: At Home with the Maternal God

In a passage that echoes Poe’s “Helen” poem, H.D.’s dedication for The Gift reads:

To HELEN
Who has
Here H.D. credits her mother, rather than Freud, for leading her back to her roots. Of course, “Helen,” the name with all its associations, first took H.D. home to the Hellenic world in which she found freedom and inspiration for her early poetry. She also returned to the theme of the Greek Helen in the last work to be published during her lifetime, *Helen in Egypt* (published in 1963, but written between 1951 and 1954). In H.D.’s spiritual geography, Egypt is the home in which Helen of Troy finds peace during her older years. According to Shari Benstock, Egypt represents the role London played for H.D. (355-56). From one spiritual home, that of London/Egypt, a home under threat from German bombs, H.D. writes to re-discover the spiritual roots in her literal home, Bethlehem, and in her biological mother, Helen Wolle.

Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, carries resonances of another Bethlehem far away, in which Jesus was born in a stable, outside the walls of the inn, because there was no room for him within. As H.D. writes in her poem, “Christmas 1944,” “we think and feel and speak / like children lost, / for one Child too, was cast / at Christmas, from a house . . .” (III, l. 8-11). Susan Schweik argues that the return to the original Bethlehem in H.D.’s famous long poem *Trilogy* corresponds to a trend among other poems published by women in London during World War II, a trend that “mapped the topography of Bethlehem, that scene of motherhood where a temporary shelter is erected in war-occupied territory” (261). H.D., however, does not idealize this temporary shelter; she wants to create a Bethlehem with spaces she can enter and live in, yet which also carry a
history of spiritual and geographical mobility. She describes such a home in “The Walls Do Not Fall,” the first poem of Trilogy, in which she places the Egyptian god “Ra, Osiris, Amen” in a “spacious, bare meeting house” (XVI, l. 1-2), the meeting-house of her Moravian ancestors.\(^{20}\) The god “was not out of place / but perfectly at home / in that eighteenth-century / simplicity and grace” (XVI, l. 9-12). Along with the Egyptian god, H.D. finds her home in the Moravian house of worship, though not for the house’s manifest purpose, but rather for its secret underside. She writes in The Gift, “Under every shrine to Zeus or Jupiter, to Zeu-pater or Theus-pater or God-the-father, along the western coast of the Peloponnesus, there is an earlier altar. There is, beneath the carved super-structure of every temple to God-the-father, the dark cave or grotto or inner hall or cella to Mary, mère, Mut, Mutter, pray for us” (113). The shrine of the mother occupies a place within the house of the father, for those who are wise enough to uncover it—or to ascend to it, if it happens to be in an attic. For H.D., coming home entails not only returning to her Moravian spiritual heritage, but also digging through to reach the (according to her) universally shared goddess-mother figure at its deepest root. She may return to a house currently occupied by the father, but, with the knowledge that it was the mother’s house first, she can truly return home to a place of safety for her—and, as she believes, for the world.

During the war years, while H.D. was writing The Gift and Tribute to Freud, as well as Trilogy, she did not physically return home. However, she did travel back to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, in 1956, accompanied by Norman Holmes Pearson, her friend and literary executor. Pearson, in his account of the trip, gave particular emphasis to H.D.’s visit to the Moravian church in which she had been raised: “She stood in the aisle\(^{20}\) Or possibly the Quaker Church H.D.’s family attended after moving from Bethlehem (Robinson 307).
of the Central Church,” he writes, “remembering the love feasts and the Unitas Fratrum. She was fascinated by Zinzendorf and his re-establishment of ‘a branch of the dispersed or “lost” Church of Provence, the Church of Love that we touch on in By Avon River.’ It was not casual when, as we left the church, she signed the register and added ‘Baptized Moravian’” (qtd. in Robinson 6). H.D.’s Moravian religious heritage was clearly important to her, and in The Gift, she emphasizes the elements of Moravianism that made it more palatable to her sensibilities than other Christian denomination: the acknowledgment that God is female as well as male. Moravians most commonly personified the Holy Spirit as female, as a “careful mother” to the human soul, which was also gendered female for both men and women (Augustine 72). The human soul was the bride of Christ, but Christ himself was often portrayed as feminine. H.D. found much here with which she could identify.

In Moravian imagery, expressed most often in the voluminous body of Moravian hymns, Christ appears as both divine husband and divine mother. In H.D.’s notes on Zinzendorf and the Moravian community he led to America, she jotted down one of Henry Rimius’ attacks upon Moravianism for its feminization of Christ: “They make his name of the feminine gender, calling him their Mother, their Mamma Jesua” (qtd. in Augustine 72). Moreover, H.D. writes in The Gift of Wunden Eiland, and Moravian hymns and worship practices expressed devotion to the crucifixion wounds in Christ’s hands, feet, and side. The worshipers speak of crawling into these wounds and finding a home there: of course, good Freudians find more than enough material here to compare Christ’s wounds to vaginal openings. Whatever amount of weight that interpretation

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21 Rimius published his critique, A Candid Narrative of the Rise and Progress of the Herrnhueters commonly called Moravians or Unitas Fratrum in 1752, and H.D. uses it as a major historical source for her unpublished novel The Mystery.
carries, the Moravians themselves made a point of stressing that God was both masculine and feminine. In fact, they criticized other Christian denominations for their emphasis on the masculine attributes of God: according to a Moravian teaching, “When those of the world accept the Father as their God, they lose sight of their Creator and fall into idolatry” (Sessler, qtd. in Robinson 83)—the idolatry of the human male, who was merely one aspect of God’s person. H.D. later narrativized this theological conflict in her unpublished novel *The Mystery*. In this work, a character reminiscent of Rimius accuses the Moravians of heresy: “your Mysticism is naturally repulsive to men, who would at all costs elevate the Father above all, and above all, above the Mother. . . . You worshipped the Wounds of Our Lord—the Wounds in excelsis in Our Lord’s side as the *rosa mystica*.

This, my friend, is gross and scandalous mysticism, as the Protestant court decided” (qtd. in Augustine 224-25). The *rosa mystica*, as contemporary readers of *The Da Vinci Code* will recognize, has a long history of associations with the sacred feminine, particularly in occult adaptations of Christian imagery. In *The Mystery*, H.D. put into the mouth of her character the kinds of accusations—mysticism, an emphasis on the feminine aspect of the divine—Freud brought against her. Freud had helped her return to her maternal roots, but those roots took her beyond the “master’s” teachings to a more satisfying union of masculine and feminine elements. The roots freed her to move into the “Cathedral,” a nurturing and vital place. Though the Cathedral has walls, these walls do not exclude possibilities, but rather make room for the intersections of material and spiritual, male and female.

22 See DuPlessis and Friedman’s article “‘Woman Is Perfect’: H.D.’s Debate with Freud” for an analysis of the disagreements between the two over religion and gender.
“There Are No/mad Women in This Attic” (Berteke Waaldijk, qtd. in Braidotti 1)

H.D.’s maternal inheritance, as revealed to her in The Gift’s contained space of the attic, the “Cathedral” within that text, is particularly mobile because of her Moravian ancestors’ status as a wandering people, exiled (because of their ecstatic religious practices) from their homeland in Europe. Yet, to H.D., the mere fact of their geographic instability is less important than what this implies about their spiritual flexibility: they, in part because they are exiles, are able to cross racial and cultural boundaries that other, more settlement-oriented colonists of America miserably failed to bridge. Though H.D. is an expatriate by choice and not an exile by force, she aligns herself with the Moravians’ ability to transcend national boundaries by entering the realm of the spirit.

In this analogy between a literally wandering people and her own spiritually boundless self, H.D. foreshadows the late twentieth-century European feminist Rosi Braidotti’s invocation of the label “nomad” to designate her own style of critical thinking. Like H.D., Braidotti focuses on the capability of the nomad to form interconnective identities and to cross established borders. However, also like H.D., Braidotti fails to fully appreciate the particularities of the subject positions she attempts to appropriate. Therefore, reading The Gift in conjunction with Braidotti’s 1994 Nomadic Subjects and with her 2006 sequel Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics shows how, even when trying to resist notions of stable identity, feminists can fall prey to the temptations of universalism, failing to hold the universal in tension with particular historical and material realities. As Sophia McClennen writes of the theoretical misuse of terms like “nomad” and “exile,” “I found that in many scholarly works the term ‘exile,’ having lost its reference to a painful state of being, was empty of history and an association with
material reality” (1). The ethical problems in Braidotti’s and H.D.’s symbolic uses of the nomad and the Jew reminds us of the importance of particularity in both feminism and spiritual geography.

Initially, however, H.D., rather than invoking a general metaphor of nomadic existence, calls upon a specific group from her own biological and cultural heritage: the Moravians. Returning to a maternal tradition, for her, then becomes a way of transcending the traditions currently surrounding her (traditions subsumed and fossilized under the male Modernist banner of all things anti-traditional); returning to a maternal tradition issued her most radical challenge to the male expatriate culture. H.D. writes in *The Gift*, “Yet we must not step right over into the transcendental, we must crouch near to the earth that made us. And the people who created us” (50). Crouching is a position necessary for survival, and this renewed bond to her mother’s Moravian ancestry gives H.D. the strength to live through the bombing of London, through a period of violence she associated with male prerogatives. (Ezra Pound was, yet again, emblematic of these destructive male traits, as he had become a Fascist, a move that H.D. condemned.) Yet crouching close to maternal roots does not exclude the possibility of transcending the ground; in fact, according to H.D., when the roots are as wide-reaching and all-embracing as those of her Moravian forebears, the embrace of particularity enables transcendence. In her own notes to *The Gift*, she explains, “I have felt all along a deep gratitude for the place of my birth and for my people—but my people, as I have tried to show are not parochial, not conditioned by small boundaries, not shut-in by provincial barriers” (*Gift* 254). The secret ceremony at Wunden Eiland, at which the Moravians transcend cultural boundaries to achieve supernatural union (epitomized in an exchange of name, and hence
identities, between the Indian Chief Paxnous’s wife Morning Star and the Moravian woman Anna von Pahlen) becomes for H.D. the kernel of hope for universal peace in a time of war.\(^{23}\)

In H.D.’s fictional re-creation of history, not only do the Native Americans and the Moravians cross boundaries of culture and religion, but individuals also break down the walls that divide them from other individuals of the past. First, Mamalie, as a young woman in 1841, merges her identity with Morning Star and Anna von Pahlen through re-living the 1741 Wunden Eiland ceremony, and then, in 1941, H.D. participates in the same experience during an air raid in London. Even the genre of *The Gift* challenges traditional notions of identity: H.D. transforms autobiography into what Dianne Chisholm calls “autoheterography,” a form of writing that inscribes the other within the self—and the self within the other (Chisholm 79-80). Or, as H.D. puts it, “A bit of me can really ‘live’ something of a word or phrase, cut on a wall at Karnak. But really ‘live’ it, I mean. Then I am for a moment . . . Egyptian; a little cell of my brain responds to a cell of someone’s brain, who died thousands of years ago” (51). The self, when open to another’s experience, is like a house in which memory is stored, but through which the wind of the other’s identity may blow when the door is left open: “The wind blows through the door, from outside, through long corridors of personal memory, of biological and of race-memory. Shut the door and you have a neat flat picture. Leave all the doors open and you are almost out-of-doors, almost within the un-walled province of the fourth dimensional” (*Gift* 84). In H.D.’s ideal house, the walls do not constrict, do not separate

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\(^{23}\) She does not, however, address how this identity-exchange from the past could address the plight of Jews in Europe.
inside from outside, do not separate individuals. Once again, the walls of H.D.’s “home,” or “Cathedral,” create a thirdspace of productive tensions.

In H.D.’s spiritual geography, she remains stationary within the Cathedral, yet the mobile element, the wind blowing through the door, breaks down the binary between inside and outside, and ultimately between motion and stasis as well. In contrast, for Rosi Braidotti, individual subjects are highly mobile, while places remain somewhat static. In the introduction to her *Nomadic Subjects*, Braidotti writes, “The nomadic subject is a myth, that is to say, a political fiction, that allows me to think through and move across established categories and levels of experience: blurring boundaries without burning bridges” (4). “Without burning bridges” implies that the nomadic subject at least wants the possibility of return to exist; yet Braidotti’s nomadic subject seems to discount the possibility that places themselves can change and “move.”

Braidotti’s nomadism draws in part upon her own background as an Italian raised in Australia and educated in France, as well as upon the experiences of literally nomadic groups of people, but she also insists on preserving a boundary between the nomad as political “myth” and as historical reality. She writes:

Though the image of ‘nomadic subjects’ is inspired by the experience of people or cultures that are literally nomadic, the nomadism in question here refers to the kind of critical consciousness that resists settling into socially coded modes of thought and behavior. Not all nomads are world travelers; some of the greatest trips can take place without physically moving from one’s habitat. It is the subversion of set conventions that defines the nomadic state, not the literal act of traveling. (5)
Like H.D., Braidotti invokes a symbolic version of a real, historical people group to assist her in her own quest to break free from confines she associates with masculine patterns of thought. However, Braidotti falls victim to her own metaphor in ways that H.D. does not: in making the nomad a figure symbolic of resistance to any sort of convention, Braidotti fails to acknowledge the conventional aspects of literally nomadic culture, the traditions inherent to a traveling way of life. As Sophia McClennen points out in critique of Deleuze and Guattari’s *Nomadology*:

> In fact, the nomad represents one of the most static and predictable forms of pre-modern life. Nomads do not wander deterritorialized spaces: they cover the same territory according to the seasons. While the boundaries of the spaces they traverse are elastic, they are still very clearly defined, and are largely controlled by the weather—hardly the basis for a decentred and free-floating identity. (62)

Moreover, in reality, nomadic cultures have frequently been patriarchal (again, literally): geographer Linda McDowell, in analyzing nomadic cultures, concludes that “many of the most essentialized stereotypes of femininity seem to be found in their strongest form among people with a mobile way of life” (219). While no doubt there are exceptions to McDowell’s observation, it rings true for the group of geographically mobile male Modernist writers of H.D.’s experience (notably Ezra Pound and D.H. Lawrence), who flouted some societal conventions and yet reinstated others through their obsession with sex as a god-like, creative act for the male.24

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24 Moravian theology was not exempt from this belief, either: H.D., while adopting many aspects of Moravianism, rejected what she referred to as “that horrible doctrine that males perform intercourse in Christ’s stead” (qtd. in Robinson 85).
Braidotti ignores the material and historical particulars of nomadism because she seeks to make the nomad into a universal metaphor of postmodern, non-unitary identity. The theoretical nomad’s identity is so mobile that it can flow freely across false boundaries of “self” and “other.” Braidotti’s description of her nomad’s sense of interconnectedness eerily echoes H.D.’s. “It is,” Braidotti writes, “as if some experiences were reminiscent or evocative of others; this ability to flow from one set of experiences to another is a quality of interconnectedness that I value highly” (5). Of course, it has been in vogue for more than twenty years for feminist theorists to question the existence of stable, unified identity. Braidotti, writing within this late-twentieth-century context, has to be more careful than H.D. to defend herself against charges of overly romantic identification with—or appropriation of—the other. She quickly adds, “Drawing a flow of connections need not be an act of appropriation. On the contrary; it marks transitions between communicating states or experiences. . . . nomadic becoming is neither reproduction nor just imitation, but rather emphatic proximity, intensive interconnectedness” (Braidotti 5). Instead of the complete merging of self with other that H.D. desires, Braidotti’s vision more closely resembles a set of adjacent and interdependent tents—inhabited, naturally, by nomads. H.D. described the self as a house through which other forces could blow; for Braidotti, the tent-self is inherently mobile and has no solid walls. As Braidotti writes of the identity-challenge issued by Deleuze, “it entails a total dissolution of the notion of a center and consequently of originary sites or authentic identities of any kind” (Braidotti 5). There is no home to return to; we simply inhabit a series of provisional dwelling-places.
Other feminists, however, particularly those from minority and third world groups who have had to struggle to gain a home, celebrate the destabilization of identity but challenge Braidotti’s easy dismissal of home and her simultaneous failure to recognize her origins and the heritage that she inevitably carries with her. Janet Wolff, weighing in on these issues, proposes that “destabilizing has to be situated”:

[The] suggestion of free and equal mobility is itself a deception, since we don’t all have the same access to the road. Women’s critique of the static, the dominant, has to acknowledge two important things: first, that what is to be criticized is (to retain the geographic metaphor) the dominant centre; and secondly, that the criticism, the destabilizing tactics originate too from a place—the margins, the edges, the less visible spaces. (235)

Or, as H.D. would suggest, from the attic.

Not only does location—center or margin—distinguish between geographical experiences, but so does whether or not one chose to be there. The issue of choice is central to Braidotti’s definition of nomadism (and this is another aspect that has earned her deserved criticism from third world feminists). Of herself, she claims, “I can say that I had the condition of migrant cast upon me [migrant in the sense that her Italian parents moved to Australia, not in the sense of “migrant worker”], but I chose to become a nomad” (10). She explains her classification of the terms migrant, exile, and nomad thus:

The migrant bears a close tie to class structure; in most countries, the migrants are the most economically disadvantaged groups. . . . By contrast, the exile is often motivated by political reasons and does not
often coincide with the lower classes; as for the nomad, s/he is usually beyond classification, a sort of classless unit. (22)

“A classless unit”? A marvel indeed, and, I would suggest, a luxury that only the already-located and the economically privileged could even claim. Braidotti further elaborates, “the nomad does not stand for homelessness, or compulsive displacement; it is rather a figure for the kind of subject who has relinquished all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity” (22). She implies that someone who is literally homeless or nomadic may have greater difficulty achieving her idealized, “classless” metaphoric nomadic identity. In fact, Braidotti herself admits, “It was not until I found some stability and sense of partial belonging, supported by a permanent job and a happy relationship, that I could actually start thinking adequately about nomadism” (35). Having a physical home seems to be a necessity before one can reject home philosophically.

H.D., as an expatriate by choice, and one supported for most of her adult life by Bryher’s substantial family money, had the advantage of belonging to the center, yet, like Braidotti, she liked to envision herself as marginal. Invoking her Moravian heritage, she aligns herself—but only when it is useful—with the exile of the Jewish people, the “scattered remnant” of Israel. As Friedman explains, “She made connections between the wanderings of the Jews and the persecutions of her own Moravian ancestors, who borrowed the term diaspora to name their own homelessness” (“Exile” 94). H.D. takes this connection further, Friedman argues, even applying the trope to her circle of Modernist writers “exiled” from dominant culture. Friedman writes approvingly of H.D.’s attempt to link the experiences of Jews and Modernists: “Her choice of the Biblical phrase ‘the scattered remnant’ to identify her companions evokes Isaiah’s
promise of redemption for the ‘scattered remnant of exiled Jews and by extension all
those in spiritual diaspora from the madness of the mainstream” (“Modernism” 95).

Friedman has a rather positive take on H.D.’s invoking of the Jewish diaspora;
other critics have recognized a problem inherent in H.D.’s use of this originally Jewish
trope, a problem feminists have also discerned in the metaphorization of the nomad: what
happens when using a metaphor leads one to ignore the real suffering of exiled and
nomadic people? What happens when the only way to transcend boundaries is by erasing
them imaginatively? After all, H.D. was aligning herself with the Hebrew exodus from
Egypt (as well as the later period of exile in Babylon) at a time when contemporary Jews
were being transported across national boundaries against their will—and being
slaughtered. Bryher was active in movements to assist Jewish refugees, but H.D. took
refuge within herself: in 1941, the same year that she was composing The Gift, she wrote
of the Jews’ suffering, “one must forget: poignant sympathy for refugees and various
victims has been drained dry; one is forced to harden oneself, or cease living altogether”
(qtd. in Harrison 72). In this case, H.D.’s response to real suffering was not
interconnective identification but rather retreat into herself.

The Gift, then, may be part of this retreat, an attempt to mythologize history to
better understand the self, rather than to understand the plight of others. Harrison argues
that the writing and the structure of The Gift are based on H.D.’s rejection of what she
characterizes as Jewish, namely “scientific materialism” and attention to historical fact.
While, in The Gift, she focuses on the recovery of an inheritance from the past, in A
Tribute to Freud, she faults her mentor for looking to his descendants for future hope.
When Freud expresses worry for his grandchildren in a world seeing the rise of Hitler, H.D. responds in her own published text:

It was so tribal, so conventionally Mosaic. As he ran over their names and the names of their parents, one felt the old impatience, a sort of intellectual eye-strain, the boredom of looking out historical, genealogical references in a small-print school or Sunday-school Bible. . . . I knew the Professor would move on somewhere else, but it seemed that the eternal life he visualized was in the old Judaic tradition. He would live forever like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in his children’s children, multiplied like the sands of the sea. That is how it seemed to me his mind was working, and that is how, faced with the blank wall of danger, his mind would work.

(TF 62-63)

Anyone who has read The Gift might ask if H.D. expects us to hearken to her recital of her Moravian ancestors’ names—her own past-centered response to the terror of war—with more respect than she listens to Freud. And she probably would expect that of us, for she imagined that her lineage belonged to the world of myth, while Freud’s genealogical recitation belonged to the world of fact.

The most famous anti-Semitic passage from Tribute to Freud arises as H.D.’s response to Freud’s sexism and anti-mysticism. Soon after H.D. recounts the incident when Freud points out to her the statue of Athena and says, “She is perfect, only she has lost her spear” (TF 70), H.D. ignores the phallic implications of his comment and writes, “He was speaking in a double sense, it is true, but he was speaking of value, the actual intrinsic value of the piece.” She interprets the comment as an indication of Freud’s
interest in the monetary worth of the statue, thus reinforcing centuries of stereotypical portrayals of Jews as misers. “Like a Jew,” she writes, “he was assessing its worth; the blood of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob ran in his veins. He knew his material pound, his pound of flesh, if you will, but this pound of flesh was a pound of spirit between us” (TF 70). Here H.D. makes reference to the famous demand of Shylock, the Jew of Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice, twisting it to emphasize the difference between Freud as the materialist and herself as spiritual. As Victoria Harrison writes, “Victim to her revisionist mythmaking is the Jew who, because he has no place in that cycle of dematerialization and regeneration [the cycle described in The Gift], must remain, in her poetic, too, part of the erased material world” (74). DuPlessis and Friedman argue that H.D. responds with this anti-Semitic backlash because of her anger over Freud’s insinuations of female incompleteness, and this explanation seems likely. I would also add, however, that H.D.’s belief in the universality of archetypes (such as the wandering, nomadic Jew—or the miserly one) added to her prejudice. Had she stuck to the particularity of her own tradition, she might have been less likely to resort to vicious and false characterizations of other groups of people.

I do not wish to set up a binary between the universal and the particular, to claim that the universal is bad and the particular good; rather, my hope is that feminists will create a thirddspace where the universal and the particular interact and overlap. “Borders” and “borderlands” have also been much romanticized of late, and I want to emphasize that this thirddspace is not a border between the universal and particular, but rather a shared territory in which they both participate. In her most recent work, Transpositions, Braidotti does indeed complicate her notion of the nomad, acknowledging the particular
differences in mobile subjects’ access to the road, as well as hinting towards theoretical thirdspace. She responds to some of her critics by arguing that:

[t]he global city and the refugee camps are not dialectical or moral opposites: they are two sides of the same global coin. They express the schizoid political economy of our times. The point of nomadic subjectivity is to identify a line of flight, that is to say a creative alternative space of becoming that would fall not between the mobile/immobile, the resident/the foreigner, but within these categories. (60, emphasis mine)

Yet, elsewhere in Transpositions, Braidotti betrays that she has strong negative associations with stable dwelling. For example, she critiques Martha Nussbaum for possessing “a strong nostalgia for fixed identities, steady locations and ties that bind” (Transpositions 15). Issues with Nussbaum aside, Braidotti’s language creates a simplistic tie between nostalgia and “immobile” place. One wonders whether she might view The Gift, with its theme of returning to roots and places of H.D.’s past, as an expression of nostalgia.

However, as Sophia McClennen points out, nostalgia and liberation are not necessarily mutually exclusive (2). A writer frequently experiences exile as both liberation and nostalgia, freedom from provinciality and longing for the community that has been lost. Feminist theory has emphasized liberation; we now need to make room for nostalgia—or, at least for remembrance, to realize that the longing for stability does not

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25 Iris Marion Young makes a key distinction between nostalgia and remembrance: “the activity of preservation should be distinguished from the nostalgia accompanying fantasies of a lost home from which the subject is separated and to which he seeks to return. Preservation entails remembrance, which is quite different from nostalgia. . . . Nostalgic longing is always for an elsewhere. Remembrance is the affirmation of what brought us here” (135).
necessarily mean that one is trapped by patriarchy. Nostalgia, if held in tension with destabilization and liberation, can make one more aware of the particularities that form each subject. As Soja writes, “In this critical thirding, the original binary choice is not dismissed entirely but is subjected to a creative process of restructuring that draws selectively and strategically from the two opposing categories to open new alternatives” (Thirdspace 5). One of those new alternatives could be a particular “homeplace” that involves remembrance without being reactionary. As Iris Marion Young writes, “Home as the materialization of identity does not fix identity, but anchors it in physical being that makes a continuity between past and present” (133).

H.D.’s “Cathedral-home” comes close to creating this thirdspace, yet ultimately fails because H.D. lets the tension between the universal and the particular fall flat, in her rush to favor “universal” metaphor. Partially because of H.D.’s Freudian beliefs in the universality of myths and images, she does end up falling into the pattern of appropriation decried by Martin and Mohanty when they write that “unity through incorporation has been the white middle-class feminist’s mode of adding on difference without leaving the comfort of home” (193). However, where she succeeds in maintaining the tensions of thirdspace, she offers a version of “home” that significantly complicates Martin’s and Mohanty’s, opening new alternatives for feminisms that truly cross borders between those who reject geographic stability and those who long for it.
Chapter Three

“Placing” the Spiritual Metaphors of Contemporary Women Writers: Sue Monk Kidd and Kathleen Norris

“The sacred feminine” is one of those usefully vague phrases with an abundance of different meanings. A Google search will bring up advertisements proclaiming “The Order of the Divine Feminine Accepting Online Applications!”, articles about goddesses, articles about Gnosticism, and, of course, many web pages either lauding or debunking the representation of the “sacred feminine” in Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*. Clearly, the phrase has a lot of appeal right now: women, many of them frustrated with repression and oppression within traditional religions, see in the “sacred feminine” a metaphor that allows them to connect their gendered bodies to the divine. However, as any sensitive reader of *The Da Vinci Code* will recognize, mere invocation of the “sacred feminine” metaphor does not mean the writer is accomplishing anything on behalf of feminist spirituality—in fact, in Brown’s case, quite the opposite.\(^{26}\) Moreover, in many cases, the sacred feminine’s overtones of universality often lead to gender essentialism, implying that women are inherently more spiritual than men. Because of its abstractness and its pretensions to universality, the metaphor of the “sacred feminine” is highly problematic for feminist spirituality. However, its popularity suggests that we do need to pay serious attention to language that speaks of sacred experience on women’s terms.

Some contemporary women writers are presenting powerful alternative metaphors for feminist spirituality, many of them involving specific spatial metaphors that ground

\(^{26}\) In his novel, the “sacred feminine” is a tool for male spirituality/sexuality: men are encouraged to seek “that spark of divinity that man can only achieve through union with the sacred feminine” (Dan Brown 310).
religious experience in particular places, while also reclaiming that ground from patriarchy. For writers such as Kathleen Norris, author of creative nonfiction such as *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* and *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, and Sue Monk Kidd, author of the memoir *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter* and the highly popular novel *The Secret Life of Bees*, the overall structural metaphor of a protagonist’s return to a place associated with her mother becomes a way of emphasizing a non-patriarchal religious inheritance. However, as the example of Sue Monk Kidd illustrates, simply using spatial metaphors does not guarantee against universalizing and essentializing. Because Kidd’s language and metaphors favor the universal over the particular, she, a white writer, ends up using African American women as a symbol for women’s spirituality, rather than allowing them to be characters in their own right. *The Secret Life of Bees*, in particular, shows the danger of ungrounded spiritual metaphors: they can all too easily become racist, can all too easily appropriate the religious experience of others for themselves.

In this chapter, I begin by exploring the potential pitfalls of Sue Monk Kidd’s spiritual metaphors, which, though intentionally feminist, advance the spiritual interests of white women at the expense of African American women. I then move on to the more successful spatial metaphors of Kathleen Norris, who, by emphasizing places associated with her own religious heritage, makes her depiction of spiritual experience more hospitable to others. Norris’s emphasis on particularity is based on her belief in the incarnation of Christ: because God entered into a particular place and time, in one particular human body, the Incarnation transforms all particular places, times, and bodies into potential sacred sites. Thus, I explore the ways that women writers like Kathleen
Norris have made use of incarnational metaphors for feminist spirituality. I argue that incarnational metaphors relating place, body, and community are one example of ways that feminism can be truly global and yet respect cultural differences among the world’s women.

**Metaphors Matter**

God’s self-revelation as a first-century male hardly seems a promising place from which to ground a feminist language; however, my hope is that the “scandal of particularity”—the obstacles that universal-oriented minds face in envisioning the divine as bound to a particular place and time—can be one useful example of how responsible feminist theory can be grounded in particulars. Far too many theorists of the past have dismissed the particular as provincial, especially when it arises from “other” places, such as the so-called third world. A feminist spiritual geography\(^\text{27}\) that emphasizes particulars becomes, paradoxically, more open to people and theories formed by particulars different from our own.

One might justifiably ask why the metaphors used in a spiritual narrative—or in feminist theory—make so much difference. Is it really possible that a narrative structured around a certain spatial image can reproduce or disrupt balances of power? In exploring the relationship between power and spatial metaphors, the perspective of geographers is especially helpful. Many geographers are fully aware of the recent trend in literary theory towards metaphors of space and movement through space, and, while generally celebrating it, they wish to call attention to the fact that “space does not just represent

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\(^{27}\)“Spiritual geography,” in Norris’s words, is the formation of a “story out of the circumstances of landscape and inheritance” (*Dakota* 2). Thus, I use it throughout this chapter to refer to the ways writers employ narrative to relate place and spirituality to each other.
power; it materializes it” (M. Brown 3). According to Henri Lefebvre, “the social relations of production have a social existence to the extent that they have a spatial existence; they project themselves into a space, becoming inscribed there, and in the process producing the place itself. Failing this, these relations would remain in the realm of ‘pure’ abstraction—that is to say, in the realm of representations and hence of ideology” (qtd. in Soja, Thirdspace 46). For example, the distinction between the “sacred” and the “profane” has governed language about religion and geography, privileging what is deemed sacred and demeaning all classified as other. “Sacred space” often emerges out of a power struggle: as Chidester and Linenthal point out, sacred land is often land that is contested between two or more groups of people (18). When Christian missionaries began their endeavors in the British Isles, they often built their churches on formerly pagan worship sites, declaring in a very material way the victory of their God. This spatialization of an ideological battle is merely one of the ways that space and social power mutually construct each other. Metaphors of space can actually produce space, as well as ways of relating to place.

Geographers remind us that “all social relations are fundamentally spatial” (Brown 142), that they occur in contexts rather than in an empty vacuum, and that these contexts shape and are shaped by our use of metaphorical language. One recent study, Michael Brown’s Closet Space: Geographies of Metaphor from the Body to the Globe, provides an insightful exploration of the way one specific metaphor, that of “the closet,” functions both in queer theory and in various spatial settings. Like the romanticized metaphor of freewheeling movement or nomadic existence that some women writers use to describe their liberation from patriarchal religion, the metaphor of the closet, Brown
argues, has become far too simplified because it has been divorced from the spatial relations that undergird it. As Brown describes the uncritical use of the metaphor, “By being placed figuratively ‘into a closet,’ gay men and lesbians are marginalized; by coming out, they are liberated. And so we see a jubilant figure in motion, one of liberation and freedom. Simple enough, right?” (2). Brown then asks:

What would happen, though, if we spatialised the closet metaphor? By that I mean using ‘space’ as a dimension of all social relations by which that power/knowledge gets materialised in the world. What would happen if we made explicit the implicit geographic dimensions of the closet metaphor? We would have to acknowledge the possibility that the closet is not always just a rhetorical flourish; that it is a manifestation of heteronormative and homophobic powers in time-space, and moreover that this materiality mediates a power/knowledge of oppression. (2-3)

In his subsequent chapters, Brown examines spatial environments such as the body, the city, the nation, and the globe, and how the “closet” operates spatially in each of them. His purpose, he explains, is to explore the “thirddspace” (using geographer Edward Soja’s term for a space that challenges dualistic thinking) at the intersection of materiality and metaphor. Thus, the closet is neither a simple nor “a complex manifestation of spatial power/knowledge. It is both” (Brown 147). As Brown demonstrates, when we use metaphors for human experience, we need to be aware of the many levels at which they represent and/or reinforce space and power.

Geographers Smith and Katz have previously argued that “The widespread appeal to spatial metaphors [in theory], in fact, appears to result from a radical questioning of all
else, a decentring and destabilization of previously fixed realities and assumptions; space is largely exempted from such skeptical scrutiny so it can be held constant to provide some semblance of order for an otherwise floating world of ideas” (qtd. in Brown 18).

Brown posits that space, too, needs to be seen for the simultaneously mobile and stable construct that it is. Likewise, responding to the notion of “traveling theory” (a concept postulated by Clifford and Said, but also seen in the work of feminist theorists such as Rosi Braidotti), Brown suggests that “it is not so much that theories travel, but that theories are always traveling and staying fixed in place” (138). In the same way, metaphors are constantly on the move and perpetually rooted in place, even as they embody relationships of power.

Metaphors in women’s spiritual narratives are often particularly expressive of relationships of power. Women writers, when constructing stories out of their lives, have traditionally resorted to metaphor as a kind of mediator of their experience. According to Mary Mason, while the male-authored autobiography emphasizes “‘singularity’ of selfhood,” women’s autobiographies often present “a selfhood that is ‘mediated’” (186). Germaine Greer further expands upon the same concept, arguing that women autobiographers display “the consciousness of a collective identity; thence of a dual consciousness, a ‘self’ represented in the hall of mirrors of a culture, as well as in their own sensibility; a sense of the importance of interpersonal relations in the formation of a sense of self” (qtd. in Leigh 66). Thus, in women’s spiritual autobiographies, selfhood may be mediated by religion, by a close kinship with a maternal figure, by nature, by a particular place. All of these influences may be combined into a set of central
metaphors—such as the metaphor I examine, the return to a place associated with the mother.

Viewing the self as mediated, however, does not mean viewing the self as powerless. In fact, feminist theologians argue that the act of crafting a narrative—about one’s spiritual experience as mediated by a place, for example—and making metaphors is an empowering religious practice for many women. Feminists point to the biblical account of the Garden of Eden, in which Adam—apparently without help from Eve—names all the animals, and ask what would happen if women claimed for themselves the power of naming, of using language creatively. According to Nicola Slee, “the very act of naming becomes revolutionary, the fundamental act which at once breaks the silence of oppression and breaks open a new power of being in women’s souls” (67). Metaphors particularly embody this empowerment: “By its very presence, metaphoric creativity—when it is not merely the repetition of stock imagery or unthinking assent to ‘dead metaphor’—is indicative of women’s spiritual vibrancy and engagement in the claiming of experience and the naming of the powers that be” (Slee 67). Naming, making metaphors to express spiritual experience, allows women to claim that experience as their own, as well as to suggest ways that it may connect to other women’s experience.

Empowerment is necessary for women who have been oppressed within chauvinistic religious traditions, and geographical metaphors should be celebrated to the extent that they embody and reflect this growing sense of oneself as a worthy participant in a religious community. However, the danger with these types of metaphors, geographical or otherwise, is that they may empower the self at the expense of the other; the likener may trample the likened. Particularly in the United States, where notions of
“journey” and “home” have been tied to Manifest Destiny and imperialism, geographical metaphors may carry traces of these associations. In the next section, I present a reading of Sue Monk Kidd’s narrative *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter* and her novel *The Secret Life of Bees*, tracing the ways in which her spatial metaphors associating home and religion end up appropriating the sacred territory of the other.

**Problems with the Ungrounded “Sacred Feminine” in Sue Monk Kidd’s Writing**

Many Western feminists emphasize the language of “deterritorialization,” preferring metaphors of movement because the language of home or “stability” suggests the confinement and oppression of the patriarchal home. Some theorists even imply that all problems can be traced to too great an attachment to the local: Caren Kaplan writes, “Emergent fascisms, recurrent nationalisms, racisms, patriarchies, and fundamentalist religious/political movements signal the dangers of relying too heavily on the ideologies of the local” (“On Location” 62). The problem with such a view, if left unqualified (and Kaplan does present a more nuanced view in her article “Deterritorializations”), is that it allows us to classify places with a greater local emphasis as provincial or even fundamentalist. Red states. Muslim nations. Indeed, in the general structural metaphor of movement-equating-development that characterizes feminist theory, we can see traces of Western bias.

Like feminist theory in its use of metaphors of travel and mobility, the traditional conversion narrative structure also depends on the association between physical movement (at least symbolically) and spiritual development. Mary Rowlandson and Elizabeth Ashbridge may exemplify this pattern, but contemporary women writers have
certainly continued it. According to David Leigh, “The use of a directional image implies, of course, that the storyteller is going somewhere, even if it is, as Eliot says, ‘to arrive where we started / And to know the place for the first time.’ The image provides the dynamic of movement and the hint of a goal to be reached” (2). Structuring a conversion narrative around the metaphor of a journey, or some other directional image, emphasizes the constructed nature of autobiography: it is only in retrospect that a writer can name the goal toward which all her wanderings were leading her. A narrative emphasizing development actually tends to prioritize time over space: if places are prominent, they mainly serve the purpose of demonstrating linear progress occurring over time. In this type of conversion narrative, as in much recent feminist theory, “‘time is equated with movement and progress, [while] ‘space/place’ is equated with stasis and reaction” (Massey 151).

What is the problem with feminists using languages and structures based on development? Elizabeth Pritchard’s article “The Way Out West: Development and the Rhetoric of Mobility in Postmodern Feminist Theory” offers some insightful answers. According to Pritchard, feminists themselves have, by such extensive use of metaphors of mobility, reinforced one of the binary divisions they claim to resist, the “binary that associates liberation and development with mobility and links oppression and underdevelopment with containment or stasis” (45). All too often, she argues, feminist theorists have conformed to the pattern of the Western “Enlightenment narrative of development,” a “narrative that tells of an escape or exit from a locatedness that is deemed to be restrictive.” In this type of narrative, “locatedness suggests confinement, enclosure, or the stasis of ‘tradition.’ Consequently, ‘development,’ in this schema, does
not entail arriving at some particular ‘place’” (46-7). Furthermore, Pritchard argues, when we associate tradition and locatedness with backwardness, we lend support to the kind of rhetoric that justifies Western “development” of the Third World. Globalization, at the same time that it destroys the parochial, rests on a rather nativist assumption that these Western narratives of progress are the ones that everyone should follow.

Though Sue Monk Kidd’s recent work claims to follow a linear progression away from Christian tradition and towards “the sacred feminine,” her narrative metaphors are often extremely traditional. Each of her two “conversion” narratives is constructed as linear progress: the subtitle of 1996’s *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter: A Woman’s Journey from Christian Tradition to the Sacred Feminine* sums it all up. Though the earlier 1991 narrative *When the Heart Waits* describes Kidd’s experience within the Christian tradition, and *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter* details her movement away from that tradition, the two books are organized along amazingly similar lines, following the various stages of Kidd’s journey. *When the Heart Waits* contains sections titled “Waiting and Transformation,” “Passage of Separation,” “Passage of Transformation,” and “Passage of Emergence”; *Dance* features “Awakening,” “Initiation,” “Grounding,” and “Empowerment.” Despite the different content of the two works, in both Kidd is conforming to the traditional linear structure of the Western conversion narrative, which progresses from beginning to end, implying improvement throughout: the destination is superior to the starting point.

Though Kidd speaks of how her spiritual awakening involved “unraveling” and “unlearning” (terms that have led Etta Madden to call *Dance* a “deconversion narrative”), the overall structure of *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter* mirrors Christian
conversion narratives of the past. The only difference is that her end destination is the “sacred feminine,” or “orthodox eclecticism.” A different goal, but the same process, same structure, same trope of enlightenment. Empowerment, the end goal, comes in the form of finding a sacred place within oneself: “It wasn’t enough to have a sacred place, to go into a circle of trees in the woods. I needed to become the circle of trees, to be the sacred place wherever I went, to dwell so deeply inside of me that there was no separation between us” (Dance 217). The destination of the inward journey is this sacred “place” inside oneself. At times, Kidd does resist her own linear impulses, claiming:

rarely is any awareness or process on this journey a one-time event. We seem to return to it over and over, each time integrating it a bit more fully, owning it a little more deeply. I may be laying out the general contours of the feminine spiritual process, but there are no neat, clear-cut lines where one phase precisely ends and the next begins. Each woman has her own timing and her own way. The passages she takes will overlap and spiral around, only to be experienced again. (Dance 98)

Yet each spiral of this inward journey seems to lead to greater enlightenment, greater self-knowledge. Despite Kidd’s attempts to nuance her language of progress, her metaphors are ultimately Cartesian, Enlightenment-derived, and thus, I would suggest, still part of the patriarchal tradition she claims to be escaping.

Furthermore, Kidd’s metaphors tend to eschew the local in favor of images of movement, as Pritchard also observes in the writings of many Western feminist theorists. Kidd uses images of entrapment and confinement to describe her condition before finding the “sacred feminine.” Both she and the protagonists of her later novels experience the
search for the divine within themselves as crossing frontiers, transgressing borders, breaking free. In a passage typical of *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*’s figurative language, Kidd writes, “A woman’s initiation includes many moments of crossing a threshold. This threshold is the bridge to our feminine soul, and crossing over is the beginning of becoming. By crossing it we are moving into a new landscape of feminine consciousness, one in which we feel regenerated or expanded as women” (108).

To be fair, Kidd does balance her metaphors by speaking also of productive, nurturing confinement. She writes of her own need to “capture” herself and tend to her soul, then going on to imply that every woman needs this kind of “space” (though, again, she is describing a place within the self, rather than a literal place): “She needs an embracing, open-armed space where she can dissolve, go to seed, and regerminate. A place to be still and tend new roots” (*Dance* 94). The way she uses the image of roots, though exaggerated, suggests her awareness that roots, tradition, history are invaluable to many women (not to mention impossible to jettison, since they form much of our identities, like it or not). However, it is clear that this semi-hibernating, germinating stage is simply one phase in a linear development. Though Kidd’s trees do remain rooted, they grow upward and provide shelter for new seedlings, in addition to becoming “women who let loose our strength, whose truth, creativity, and vision fly like spores into the world” (*Dance* 198). Kidd’s assertion that these women-trees simply need to be transplanted from masculine-dominated ground to a new, more nourishing feminine

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28 Images of confined space (with a confinement that is necessary for a time in order to promote creativity, a metaphor that suggests the “confinement” women used to undergo before giving birth) also do appear in feminist literary studies, most notably Judith Fryer’s *Felicitous Space: Imaginative Structures of Edith Wharton and Willa Cather*. 
ground is perhaps simplistic, but she does acknowledge that roots, that places, are necessary, at least in their metaphorical form.

The image of transplanting once again emphasizes that, for Kidd, space is static, and spiritual growth is possible only with movement, with seeking new ground. Of course, a narrative focusing on geographical movement and linear spiritual growth need not be problematic, and may indeed be feminist. However, in Kidd’s case, her view of space as fixed leads, I would suggest, to her impulses to appropriate objects and traditions from other cultures and to bring them within her own “place.” After Kidd has left the Southern Baptist church and begun her own journey “within,” she begins to seek out the more abstract spiritual Mother, exploring various historical manifestations of “the divine feminine,” from Cretan goddesses to Mary. However, she buttresses her abstract quest with material reality: she begins to collect various objects from around the world, objects that, to her, represent the divine feminine. She places them on an altar in her home, creating her own sacred space. In the process, she divorces these objects from their original context, treating them as essentially a-spatial products to be consumed. She writes of a new acquisition, “The Matryoshka doll found a place on my altar. Eventually, though, she came to represent not only the Divine Feminine at the core of a woman but also the line of mothers I came from” (Dance 181). A similar fate awaits a Minoan snake goddess figure. These objects, from diverse locations, are transplanted to Kidd’s sacred ground and made to represent an abstraction perhaps completely unrelated to their original cultural context.

While the trend of projecting abstraction onto de-contextualized objects is troubling in The Dance of the Dissident Daughter, it becomes even more disturbing in
Kidd’s tremendously popular novel *The Secret Life of Bees*, in which African American women become symbolic “objects” representing the white character’s quest for the “sacred feminine.” In the novel, a young white girl in 1960s South Carolina comes of age spiritually through the nurturing of a community of African American sisters, women who had also, as it chanced, raised the girl’s mother as well. What bothers me most is that Kidd uses the Boatwright sisters’ struggle for civil rights as a metaphor for her young protagonist’s (and Kidd’s own, it seems) struggle for freedom from patriarchy. In an earlier essay about the African American woman who had worked for Kidd’s family, she writes, “Grovinia taught me subversion” (“Slave”)—not subversion against racism, but subversion against patriarchy. Of course, struggles against racism and struggles against gender bias are often connected. But here one eclipses the other. What seems to matter most to Kidd is that the white girls raised by black women become independent, even if their subversive mentors remain subservient. Black women’s subversion becomes a metaphor that, robbed from its original context, empowers white women at the expense of African American women.

Kidd’s misuse of African American women’s subversion as a metaphor for (white) female empowerment seems related to her use of geographical metaphors for (again, white) women’s spiritual development. In both of Kidd’s recent novels, *The Secret Life of Bees* and *The Mermaid Chair*, the female protagonist makes a literal journey across space to a place associated with her mother, and there she experiences a spiritual rebirth. However, the result of this rebirth is to render place (and the literal mother) unnecessary, for Lily and Jessie find “home” within themselves and are nurtured by the “mother” within. The metaphor of place erases real places.
Indeed, this ability to render place unnecessary seems to be what separates Kidd’s newly enlightened protagonist from the maternal African American figures who serve her spiritual needs. The African American characters, particularly in *The Secret Life of Bees*, remain rooted in place in their stereotypical earthiness, even though it is August, one of Lily’s black “stand-in mothers,” who tells Lily that “Our Lady [both the Madonna and the more general representative of the “sacred feminine”] is not some magical being out there somewhere, like a fairy godmother. She’s not the statue in the parlor. She’s something inside of you” (*Bees* 288). Through August’s tutelage, the white protagonist is freed from the need for literal place and for a literal mother. Lily does remain at the beekeeping house with August at the end of the novel, but Kidd makes it clear that, thanks to August’s tutoring, Lily will be able to journey wherever she wants with the divine mother inside herself. The physical object that has so inspired her, the statue known as Our Lady of Chains, remains in the beekeeping women’s parlor. The Boatwright sisters and their friends, the Daughters of Mary, reenact each year the story of the statue, how a white slave-owner chained her down, but how she broke free of her chains, inspiring the slaves to plan their own escape. Yet, within the novel, reenactment and remembrance is the only freedom the Daughters of Mary experience from the injustice of the 1960s South.

In Kidd’s maternal spatial metaphors, despite her good intentions, her African American women characters become objects, simply there for the psycho-spiritual gratification of the white protagonist Lily: *The Secret Life of Bees* perhaps unknowingly glorifies the white female domestic fantasy of the self-sacrificing black mammy, giving this old stereotype the new gloss of the “divine feminine.” *Bees* does include some over-
handed condemnation of the racial prejudice in the 1960s South: Kidd’s own deployment of racist stereotypes in the characters of August and Rosaleen is probably unintentional, though this makes it no less egregious. The problem, I would argue, lies not only in Kidd’s personal insensitivity but also in her failure to fully spatialize her spiritual geography; the spiritual, for her, is not spatial in any but the most superficial sense. Therefore, an airy pop spiritualism can be projected onto the characters she selects as the “objective correlative” for expressing these beliefs. Who better to mouth maternal spirituality than black women, who, according to long-held white American stereotypes, are inherently religious, bosomy earth-mothers? Kidd neglects to explore the way these associations are historically grounded in space, particularly the space of domestic households in the South, though this history is her characters’ history as well as her own. August Boatwright was originally the maid who raised Lily’s mother Deborah, and when Deborah finds herself trapped in an unhappy marriage, she runs away to her surrogate mother, never stopping to consider whether August feels the same way about her. When, years later, Lily too runs away from her father, she follows her mother’s trail, thanks to a card with the image of the Black Madonna on it—the Boatwright sisters’ label for their honey jars—and also imposes upon August’s seemingly inexhaustible ability to nurture little white girls.

Lily’s own displacement of her need for a mother onto August parallels Kidd’s own use of the Black Madonna as a symbol forced to bear the author’s “healing,” nurturing message. In a 2003 interview, Kidd explains that she felt no personal connection with Lily’s longing for her biological mother (because Kidd’s own mother was still alive at the time she wrote the novel), but, she continues, “as I was writing I
understood that I did know about that other longing for this larger, we could say, spiritual mother. In the book I let the Black Madonna carry all that” (qtd. in Schlumpf, italics mine). The Black Madonna, despite her particular history, and her particular meaning to a group of oppressed people, is made to bear “universal” metaphorical weight. Kidd’s universalism comes across clearly in another interview-based article, in which the journalist writes, “She [Kidd] suggests women react so strongly to her characters because of this elemental and universal feminine quest. After all, the characters who inhabit her work are earthy, fleshy women, so dissimilar to the images perpetuated by Hollywood” (Kinosian). Neither Kidd nor the article’s author draw attention to the fact that the first instance of “women” in this quote refers almost exclusively to white women, while the second instance refers almost exclusively to black women. White equals spirit, black equals flesh; it’s the same dualistic racism that has characterized white romanticism for over two centuries. Perhaps because of traditional white spirituality’s lack of celebration of embodiedness and earthiness, white romantics have projected those qualities onto darker-skinned people, seeing in the (oppressed) Other a power to liberated the repressed white society. Kidd revels in the Black Madonna’s power as a universal symbol to liberate white women. Kidd says in an interview, “Her darkness has great power in it. She becomes a flashpoint for independent spirit, for women conjuring up their own strength and their own power, being their own authority.” She then continues, “She also has a subversive streak in her, which I resonate with. Yes, I’m a Christian, but I’m pretty much a dissident sort of Christian in a lot of ways” (qtd. in Schlumpf). Robbed of her particularity, the Black Madonna is appropriated to liberate white women and Kidd
herself from patriarchal Christianity, just as Kidd once expected her family’s African 
American maid to do for her.

I return once again to the story of Grovinia that Kidd relates in her early essay 
“The Slave Chair.” Kidd recounts how Grovinia allowed her to catch tadpoles, even 
though it was considered improper for a young white girl. She writes, “During the race-
turbulent years I was in college, I told my mother the story of the tadpoles and speculated 
that women like Grovinia became the consciousness of values within many white 
families, functioning as the hidden voice of dissidence which vibrated in the white 
children they reared. I said, ‘Grovinia taught me subversion.’” Kidd’s mother then 
replies, “I’m so glad, because I wasn’t able.” While Kidd has the wisdom to see in 
Grovinia a strong agent rather than a simple victim, this passage foreshadows her later 
tendency to turn black women into liberating symbols, rather than celebrating their 
strength in an emplaced, embodied, and yet spiritual context.

On Sue Monk Kidd’s own web site, she comments on her inspiration and 
intentions for the Black Madonna in much the same language as her interview responses. 
However, she adds one particularly telling observation: “I read an essay by author 
Kathleen Norris in which she made the amazing statement that Mary is particularly suited 
to post-modernism. She didn’t elaborate on the reason, but my guess is that Mary, fresh 
with feminist appropriations, has the potential to undergird women’s reformations” 
(Kidd, “Black Madonna”). If Kidd is referring to the chapter “Virgin Mary, Mother of 
God” from Norris’s Amazing Grace, she is mistaken: Norris does elaborate on what she 
means by Mary’s postmodern attributes, writing of Mary’s ability to “confront and 
disarm the polarities that so often bring human endeavors to impasse: the subjective and
the objective, the expansive and the parochial, the affective and the intellectual” (Amazing 122)—and, I might add, concrete space and metaphorical space. Kidd, however, persisting in her own dualisms, fails to see this complexity and instead resorts to, in her own words, very white “feminist appropriations” that reinforce the binary between black and white, material and metaphorical.

Incarnation, Heterotopia, and Thirdspace in Kathleen Norris’s Spiritual Geography

Having shown how de-contextualized, de-spatialized metaphors for spirituality may lead to universalism and a de-valuing of particulars (especially the particulars of others), I now want to examine a more sensitive and fruitful approach to spatial metaphors for feminist spirituality. Kathleen Norris, as a poet, is no stranger to metaphor: however, it was not until she left New York City and returned to her maternal grandmother’s home in South Dakota that she discovered geographical metaphors as an especially effective way of connecting her individual spirituality to her mother’s religious heritage—and, by extension, to the greater maternal tradition within Christianity. In the process, she celebrates the particular landscape of South Dakota, without resorting to provinciality.

It would be far too simple to argue that Norris’s writing is more ethically responsible and more feminist than Kidd’s works because Norris makes a real, physical, geographical journey, while Kidd and her protagonists ultimately make geographical reality into an abstraction. It is true that Norris’s greater attention to embodiedness is related to her celebration of the Incarnation, and that this makes her writing more resonant with contemporary feminism’s eschewal of patriarchal universals. However, I
do not want to say that Norris’s writing trumps Kidd’s simply because she is more literal, while Kidd revels in ungrounded metaphors. Any facile division between the material and the metaphorical denies the way that space is constructed from both. However, I suggest that Norris’s metaphors accomplish a more complex union of the material and the metaphorical, the general and the particular, because of her use of the Incarnation as a lens for feminist spirituality.

At first glance, Kathleen Norris’s spiritual narrative *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* may seem less radical than Kidd’s: *Dakota*’s content seems far more akin to the traditional Christian conversion narrative than *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*’s. The narrative describes Norris’s move to her maternal grandmother’s home in small-town South Dakota and her subsequent conversion to Christianity when she begins attending her grandmother’s church. A simple description of the book’s “plot” leaves us assuming that *Dakota* is a celebration of good old rural American values and the form of nationalistic Christianity that becomes entangled with them. This characterization, however, would be far from the truth. In fact, *Dakota* shakes up many of our assumptions about the structure of the conversion narrative and about the “place” of women in Christian tradition.

In many Christian conversion narratives (as well as in many gay coming-out narratives), the new convert feels “out of place” in her former community and must move to a new location in order to find acceptance—or to preserve her own life. The geographical move becomes representative (at least in the narrative telling) of the spiritual transformation the writer has already undergone. In Norris’s narrative, however, her geographical move precedes her turn to Christianity, and she portrays her
conversion—in a nonlinear way, as the book is organized into vignettes, meditations, and “weather reports”—as a result of learning to dwell in her new community. Conversion follows “the basic principle of desert survival: not only to know where you are but to learn to love what you find there” (Dakota 23). This process involves learning to love one’s own religious inheritance, accepting it as both blessing and curse. For Norris, then, the movement of conversion stretches in all directions, backward and forward, up and down, rather than conforming to a simple linear pattern. Similarly, Norris attributes this paradoxical stationary-yet-mobile quality to religion as a whole. “At its Latin root,” she reminds us, “the word religion is linked to the words ligature and ligament, words having both positive and negative connotations, offering both bondage and freedom of movement” (Dakota 133). Norris did make a free choice in moving to South Dakota, to her maternal grandmother’s house, from New York City. However, she celebrates the way that the limited circumstances of her new place steered her in directions she never would have considered for herself. In the limits of place—and her lack of options—she experiences the divine. She reports that she is sometimes asked by more urban friends why she chose to explore spirituality in Christian monasteries rather than Buddhist ones. Norris replies:

The answer is geography, of course; I would have had to travel more than five hundred miles. And I didn’t have the money. For me, the result of what the world might consider deprivation has been a happy one. More or less forced to take a good look at where I was, and take advantage of what was available locally, I was also forced to find sustenance within my own
religious heritage. And I found it much more various, rich, and nourishing than I had ever imagined. (Amazing 293-294)

Rather than shopping the religious market, Norris grounds herself in the religion of her mothers, and she surprises herself by finding a maternal spirituality among a bunch of male monks. Obviously, her vision of maternal religion is not restricted to biological mothering (Norris herself, she shares, is unable to have children). But it is grounded in a commitment to receiving—and sometimes wrestling with—maternal heritage, a characteristic of some of the most productive feminist theology and theory.

Norris’s vision of religion as both captivating and liberating, as return and as new frontier, is intimately connected to the particulars of the place of her conversion, the place of her dwelling. Her biological roots lead her to the Presbyterian church where her grandmother worshipped, but she attributes her realization of the importance of her religious inheritance to the past and continued presence of Native Americans in South Dakota. She writes:

My path of conversion may have a few elements of Indianness, because of the spirits of the land where I live, and because I understand that my faith comes from my grandmothers. It was in moving back to the Plains that I found my old ones, my flesh and blood ancestors as well as the desert monks and mystics of the Christian church. Dakota is where it all comes together, and surely that is one definition of the sacred. (Dakota 131)

According to some geographers of religion, actually, sacred space may be defined as a place of conflict, where one group seeks to trump another group’s claim to a site. Norris’s depiction of all these influences—the Protestant churches, the Benedictine monasteries,
and the Native Americans—“coming together” may seem rosy (and a bit appropriative, too, an issue I will address shortly) given the history of white imperialism in the American West, the massacre of many Native Americans and the theft of their sacred land. However, at least Norris does not ignore this aspect of Dakota’s spiritual geography, and in fact this history is the reason she is compelled to redefine “frontier,” a word often used thoughtlessly in spiritual autobiography: “the fact that one people’s frontier is usually another’s homeland has been mostly overlooked” (Dakota 127). Norris defines frontier “not as a place you exploit and abandon but as a place where you build on the past for the future. When we journey here, we discover that it is no less old than new” (Dakota 133). Spiritual geography must be attentive to the history of the place, as well as one’s own personal history. When the two meet, conversion happens—or takes place.

Of course, for Norris and for many non-Native Americans writing about spiritual geography, conversion may actually take place: in some ways, “every establishment of sacred space [is] a conquest of space” (Chidester and Linenthal 8). Conflicts over sacred space occur not only over geographical boundaries, but also over a contest of whose meaning, whose interpretation of the land’s sacredness, will prevail. Chidester and Linenthal explain further:

When space or place becomes sacred, spatially scarce resources are transformed into a surplus of signification. . . . In this respect, a sacred place is not defined by spatial limits; it is open to unlimited claims and counter-claims on its significance. As a result, conflict in the production of
sacred space is not only over scarce resources but also over symbolic surpluses that are abundantly available for appropriation. (18)

To some degree, Norris is indeed guilty of appropriating “Native American” emphasis on ancestors’ role in spirituality. However, this appropriation seems to occur as a result of her trying to acknowledge all the spiritual claims to the sacredness of one piece of land. In contrast to Chidester and Linenthal—and Kidd, too—she tries to emphasize the geographical reality of sacred space, including the history of its inhabitants. What she is trying to create is, I would argue, a Foucauldian “heterotopia,” which is “capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several places, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” and which also is “able to enclose in one place all times” (“On Other Spaces”). Foucault argues that the time-collapsing form of the heterotopia is an exclusively modern phenomenon, finding its exemplary expression in the space of the museum. However, most would agree that a museum cannot be “sacred space,” because the “places” and “times” contained within are separated from their original context. In some ways, Norris, while trying to respect the Native American history of the land, does end up divorcing it from the land and metaphorizing it in her own history and bloodline. However, unlike Kidd, Norris does attempt to resist careless appropriation of other spiritual traditions: she writes that, while, for Native Americans, the land of Dakota has always been imbued with a sense of the holy, “their tradition is not mine, and in returning to the Great Plains, where two generations of my family lived before me, I had to build on my own traditions, those of the Christian West” (Dakota 2-3).

Furthermore, Norris’s quest for her own place-based religious tradition leads her to express concern over the appropriation of Native American land and spirituality by
others. This is another reason she is especially careful to emphasize the exploration of one’s own religious and cultural roots: writing in the eighties and early nineties, she had seen far too much appropriation of Native American spirituality by whites seeking to escape the burdens of their own heritage. In the 1950s, “Indian words and symbols were appropriated to sell a myth of freedom on the American road. Pontiac, Cherokee, even the sacred Thunderbird” (Dakota 29). However, by the 1980s, white Americans, turned shallow by their lack of their own meaningful interconnections between religion, ancestors, and place, began to pilfer these elements from Native American religions. Norris points out that white Americans’ romantic longing for the religious other has “forced people whose religions have become trendy in our time, American Indians and Buddhist monks among them, to grow adept at sorting out people who have an adult grasp of their own religious traditions and those who are seeking interfaith dialogue from those who are trying to escape their own inheritance by simply appropriating someone else’s” (Amazing 83). She then tells the tale of a young American friend who went to Thailand and tried to join a Buddhist monastery there. “Go back home and become a Christian monk first, they told him, learn your own tradition” (Amazing 83). Knowing your own particular tradition, whether you end up accepting or rejecting it, teaches you where you are.

One might ask, then, why Dakota, in addition to crediting the influence of Native American spirituality and of Norris’ own Protestant forebears, also draws so much from Benedictine and the even earlier desert monasticism. After all, her move to South Dakota rooted her “in the ground of [her] grandmother’s faith” (Dakota 93), and the maternal elements of her conversion allowed her to find a feminist “place” within Christianity;
these Benedictine monks are a community exclusively composed of men. Moreover, they are hardly an organic outgrowth of the Dakota land—their status as transplants is as obvious as one could imagine. However, Norris, drawn for reasons she doesn’t understand to the Benedictine monasteries, finds in their theology—and in their relationship to place—a way to more fully embrace her maternal inheritance of Christianity, as well as to remain responsive to the place in which she lives. Benedictine communities, both male monasteries and female convents, are distinguished by two particular, seemingly paradoxical vows: the vow of “stability” and the vow of *conversatio*, or “continual conversion.” Stability binds the monastics to a particular community; it commits them to learn to dwell in a fruitful way with place and with the people who inhabit it. Continual conversion demands that the monastic stays open to change, ever seeking new ways of relating to place, to people, and to God. Norris emphasizes that the “both/and” nature of these vows is essential to her experience of emplaced Christianity:

We know what happens when we have stability without conversion; we end up stagnant, curled up comfortable with that familiar idol called “This is the way we’ve always done it.” And conversion without stability may describe the current state of affairs with regard to the spiritual life in America. Many seem to value change for its own sake; we’re always after something new. But when seeking the holy becomes a goal in itself, the last thing we want to do is find it. In all of the religious traditions I know,

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29 There are, of course, Benedictine nuns as well, and Norris occasionally visits Benedictine convents. However, because the Benedictine monasteries are closer to her geographically, they are where she has most often gone to wrestle out her faith.
anything that feels like finding translates into commitment. And like conversion itself, commitment is scary. (*Amazing* 42)

Once again, this monastic ideal makes sense for her, and allows her to place herself within Christian tradition, because it is also her maternal inheritance. She writes:

> In living out my conversion as a daily and lifelong process, I treasure most the example of my grandmother Totten, who dwelled in one marriage, one home, one church congregation for over sixty years. Her faith was alive for anyone to see; her life demonstrates that conversion is no more spectacular than learning to love the people we live and work among. It does not mean seeking out the most exotic spiritual experience, or the ideal religion, the holiest teachers who will give us the greatest return on our investment. Conversion is seeing ourselves, and the ordinary people in our families, our classrooms, and on the job, in a new light. (*Amazing* 44)

The way that Norris intertwines the various influences in her continual conversion may suggest a way that feminist theorists can value the particular without reverting to provincialism. For Norris, as a Christian, this balance between the local and the global is mediated by her belief in the Incarnation, the entrance of God, in the historical person of Jesus Christ, into a particular time and place. To better understand how incarnational spiritual metaphors offer insights that feminists might be able to adapt, it will be helpful to take a deeper look at Norris’s combination of spatial metaphor and materiality through the lens of contemporary geographical theory.

Postmodern geographer Edward Soja, drawing from Henri Lefebvre, explains how, in the past, Western thinkers, when dealing with space, have tended to over-
privilege either the “real” or the “transcendent” (or “cognitive”); they have fallen prey to either the “illusion of opaqueness” or the “illusion of transparency.” In the former, the theorist limits space to a “superficial materiality”: it is viewed as “susceptible to little else but measurement and phenomenal description: fixed, dead, and undialectical” (Postmodern 7). Marxist geographers, according to Soja (himself a Marxist geographer), have been especially prone to this fallacy. Writers dealing with spatial metaphors for spirituality, on the other hand, tend to be blinded by the illusion of transparency, which “dematerializes space into pure ideation and representation, an intuitive way of thinking that equally prevents us from seeing the social construction of affective geographies, the concretization of social relations embedded in spatiality” (Postmodern 7). This misreading of space emphasizes metaphorical meaning—metaphorical meaning that ignores its own social construction in space—at the expense of materiality. As I have argued, Kidd’s writing falls prey to the illusion of transparency.

In response to the illusion of opaqueness and the illusion of transparency, Soja proposes not a mere synthesis, but the creation of “thirddspace,” an arena in which “the original binary choice is not dismissed entirely but is subjected to a creative process of restructuring that draws selectively and strategically from the two opposing categories to open new alternatives” (Thirdspace 5). In this thirddspace, the theorist uses a “trialectical” approach and insists that “each ‘field’ of human spatiality—the physical, the mental, the social—be seen as simultaneously real and imagined, concrete and abstract, material and metaphorical. No one mode of spatial thinking is inherently privileged or intrinsically ‘better’ than the others as long as each remains open to the re-combinations and simultaneities of the ‘real-and-imagined’” (Thirdspace 65). For Christian writers who
emphasize place, the Incarnation may be this kind of thirdspace—not a fixed, static location or an airy, transcendent one, but a complex reality enveloping—in ever-changing ways—physical, mental, and social particularities.

In much current writing about Christian spirituality and place, the Incarnation symbolizes the value inherent in every time and location. Ideally, the Christian cultivates a meaningful relationship with the particulars of her location but also recognizes that Jesus’ becoming human—the infinite God’s demonstration of the significance of finite human contexts—grants equal validity to all times and places. As theologian David Brown writes, “for God to impact on every aspect of us immanence must also be claimed: God involved with matter. Christians believe that this happened at the deepest and most profound level in the incarnation, but if there is to be a continuing effect this cannot have happened just once, but must relate to all material existence” (81-82).

Though Christians point to one historical Incarnation, they also believe that incarnational expressions of God continue, as God continues to be revealed through matter, through particular circumstances. Thus, incarnation is local and global at once—without resorting to abstract universalities. Incarnational spirituality sees the divine in the particular: it “is subversive in that it not only makes space for the particular but also makes space at the heart of each particular reality for what is other and more than itself” (Sheldrake, Spaces 67). Viewed in this way, an incarnational spirituality of place is one way of accomplishing what Doreen Massey calls an “open and porous” view of place. “The particularity of place,” she writes, “is . . . constructed not by placing boundaries around it and defining its identity through counterposition to the other which lies beyond

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30 See David Brown, Lane, and Sheldrake.
[for example, declaring this space ‘sacred’ and that space ‘profane’], but precisely (in part) through the specificity of the mix of links and interconnections to that ‘beyond’” (5). Incarnational theology, in its emphasis on particularity, at least partially bases access to the divine Other on the networks of relationships between human others, because incarnational Christians believe that each human other can embody Christ.

Norris writes, “I try to take the Incarnation seriously; by that I mean that I look to the local, the particular, the specific, to determine how to express my Christian faith” (Amazing 238). Yet, because she values the particularities of other contexts, her emphasis on the local does not stagnate. In Dakota, she constantly draws comparisons between the people and landscape of South Dakota and the Egyptian desert in which the early monastics lived. She does not override the specificity of either context, does not seek to erase their difference, but rather lets their particularities interact in the space of her own life and her narrative of that life. This specific “mix of links and interconnections” to the divine “beyond” is part of the community that makes up her spiritual geography.

When she first began attending her Presbyterian grandmother’s church, Norris had particular difficulty connecting her spiritual experience with “language about Jesus Christ,” which was “meant to be most inviting” but which made her feel “most left out” (Dakota 94). She felt the “pain and anger of a feminist looking warily at a religion that has so often used a male savior to keep women in their place” (Dakota 94). Yet she finds herself re-enacting, re-embodying events from biblical and church history, even from the life of Jesus, and in this participatory, incarnate process, she finds herself changing. In a section from Dakota entitled “Cana,” Norris first explores similarities between poets and ministers in small-town South Dakota, who seek each other out for books and discussion,
both of whom are “people who believe in the power of words to effect change in the human heart” (Dakota 105). Then, suddenly, Norris places us in a scene at a monastery, early in the morning:

An orange butterfly lights on my arm. The abbey bells begin to ring. I had resisted coming here, but a clergy friend said: “You’ll go to the monastery, pull yourself together, and write it out.”

“You don’t know what you’re asking,” I snapped. He said: “That’s what Jesus said to his mother at Cana.” (106)

Norris unknowingly finds herself uttering the same words. Jesus speaks in John 2:4, after the host at the wedding has run out of wine and Mary has asked her son to do something about it. Mary does not fully understand what she is asking, but Jesus nevertheless responds by turning water into wine for the wedding guests. This is the first miracle Jesus ever performed, according to John, and in juxtaposing her own story to this scriptural one, Norris implies that some miracle will occur in her life as well, that her watery experience with organized religion will be transformed into joyful, celebratory wine. She may not be able to accept abstract language about Christ, but she finds herself speaking his language, embodying it in a new context. Yet this is not merely an individual experience, as Norris sets this event within the larger context of rural communities in South Dakota. In her spiritual geography, ancient Christian history, her present natural and social surroundings, as well as her personal experience, all combine in unexpected ways to create sacred space.

31 Or at least a paraphrase of their intent. John 2:4 actually reads, “And Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come’” (NRSV). Most interpreters agree that, in this passage, Jesus is responding to Mary’s request by suggesting that there are larger messianic implications to it, implications that she herself does not yet understand.
For Norris and for other Christian writers, the Incarnation is not only the meeting place between self and other, but also between materiality and metaphor. While the material is usually associated with the local and the particular, and metaphor often takes on connotations of universality, an incarnational emphasis makes this easy dualism impossible. In the theology of the medieval Scottish Franciscan Duns Scotus, from whom many Christians, knowingly or unknowingly, have drawn incarnational spirituality, “each individual or particular thing is more than a symbol of something greater. That would make it dispensable, usable then disposable” (Sheldrake, “Human” 58, italics mine). Instead of merely existing to point to Christ, each material thing exists to be itself, and in being itself, it also embodies Christ. Sheldrake explains:

Here, Scotus departs from the better known scholastic theory of analogy, whereby true being exists only in God and everything else is derivative, pointing only indirectly toward true being. Scotus, in contrast suggests that all things, in their very particularity, participate directly in the life of the Creator. Because everything participates directly in God, each thing is a uniquely important expression of God’s beauty as a whole. (58)

Hence, for those who practice incarnational Christian spirituality, material things do not simply stand in as symbols for divine truth; they embody Christ by being what they were created to be. This is why Dakota contains very brief sections, like the one entitled “God Is in the Details: Shortgrass,” that present a concrete image and then let it be, letting the reader ascertain its spiritual and metaphorical import:

32 If this sounds a lot like Gerard Manley Hopkins’s sonnet “As Kingfishers Catch Fire,” there’s a reason: Hopkins was an avid reader of Scotus, referring to him in the poem “Duns Scotus’s Oxford” as “he . . . who of all men most sways my spirits to peace.”
He said: ‘You want to hay your brome and crested wheatgrass. They’re the taller, more lush grasses, not native, and they’ll lose their nutritive value quickly. Any moisture and they’ll frost-kill. But the native shortgrass—that’s your grama and buffalo grass, sedges and switch grass—makes for good winter pasture. You let it stand, and it cures on the stem.’

(Dakota 154)

That’s the entire section. Here, Norris allows both the farmer’s words and the subject of his speech—shortgrass—to represent the value of rootedness and of spiritual endurance. The section’s title suggests that this goes beyond mere representation, that God is embodied and expressed through such natural details.

Norris finds particular inspiration in the details of maternal heritage and space, found both in her own biological ancestry and among her foremothers in the faith. She writes:

the question of inheritance still haunts me, and I sometimes have the radical notion that I’m a Christian the way a Jew is a Jew, by maternal lineage. Flannery O’Connor remarks in her letters that ‘most of us come to the church by a means the church does not allow,’ and I may have put on my grandmother Totten’s religion until it became my own. But the currents of this female inheritance spring from deep waters. Mary is also my ancestor, as is Eve. (Dakota 95)

In writing of these two most famous mothers from the Bible, Norris revises the tendency throughout Christian history to paint Eve as sinner and Mary as saint who redeems Eve’s fall. She claims them both in her heritage, without judging them. They have both become
hers through the faith of her maternal relatives, once again demonstrating the way her depiction of spiritual inheritance is grounded in the particulars of place and simultaneously suggests that the particular place is not entirely limited by its geographical boundaries.

Perhaps because of Norris’s emphasis on Incarnation, Mary, who conceived and gave birth to Jesus, does appear more frequently than Eve in her writing. She writes in spatial terms of the moment in time when Mary conceives: “the Incarnation is the place, if you will, where hope contends with fear” (Amazing 30, italics mine). She writes of the original place in which Christ’s incarnation began: “Coming from Galilee, as it were, from a place of little hope, it reveals the ordinary circumstances of my life to be full of mystery, and gospel, which means, ‘good news’” (Amazing 31). Because the incarnation happened in a scorned place—Galilee—among marginalized people, the particulars of this context change—convert—how Norris sees the specific circumstances of her own time and place. For Norris, then, maternal space is primarily the space of incarnate reality: again, the space where the abstract and the particular merge, the space of both her biological mothers and her mothers in the faith, who come together to form her spiritual geography.

Like Kidd, Norris laments the absence of Mary in her Protestant upbringing, attributing this lack to the church’s masculinist attempts to suppress mystery. She rejoices in having found contemporary writers (most notably Ana Castillo in her anthology Goddess of the Americas: Writings on the Virgin of Guadalupe) who celebrate Mary as

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33 The annunciation, in which the angel Gabriel told Mary that she would conceive and bear the Christ child occurred in Mary’s hometown of Nazareth, in the region of Galilee. In that time, Galileans were widely regarded as ignorant, backward, and poor, with “hick” accents. This is why, when Nathanael first hears of Jesus, he asks incredulously, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46, NRSV).
“a catalyst for boundary-breaking experiences, contradiction, and paradox” (Amazing 120). At Guadalupe, Mary appeared as a mestiza and, Norris writes, “the scandal of miscegenation was given a holy face and name,” an event recalling for her “the scandal of the Incarnation itself, the mixing together of human and divine in a young, unmarried woman” (Amazing 120). Mary not only retains her particularity as the Galilean teenager, but she also embodies fully the suffering and strength of mestizos in Latin America: Galilee and Guadalupe fuse and yet remain distinct as Mary collapses and expands spiritual geography. Norris writes that she has come “to think of Mary as the patron saint of ‘both/and’ passion over ‘either/or’ reasoning” (Amazing 121): “Ever since I first encountered Mary in that Benedictine abbey I have learned never to discount her ability to confront and disarm the polarities that so often bring human endeavors to impasse: the subjective and objective, the expansive and the parochial, the affective and the intellectual” (121-22). In other words, Mary functions as a thirdspace, allowing Norris to find her own place within a religion that had once seemed patriarchal to her. “There’s a lot of room in Mary,” writes Norris (Amazing 123)—room for particular and global experiences to mix in powerful combinations.

Mary, whose participation was crucial to Christ’s Incarnation, is a thirdspace who breaks down boundaries between human and divine. Christ’s Incarnation is the central metaphor for Christians’ relationship to particulars; however, because Christ happened to be incarnate in a male body, many women find it easier to contemplate the Incarnation through Mary. Though she herself is not divine, it is her body that gives life to Jesus’ body. Thus, for many Christians, both male and female, Mary is the prime human
example of what it is like to “bear” Christ, as all Christians are now commissioned to do.  

And yet Mary was also a particular body. Norris is careful not to keep Mary at the abstract level, but to connect her to the processes of women’s bodies. In doing so, Norris reclaims women’s bodies as sacred space. As Susan Bordo argues, in masculinist Enlightenment thinking, “the role of the unclean and impure has been played, variously, by material reality, practical activity, change, the emotions, ‘subjectivity,’ and most often—as for Descartes—by the body” (76), particularly the female body, and most particularly the maternal female body, as it has been made to represent all of the items in the previous list. Thus, for a feminist to claim the value of materiality in spiritual geography, she must often deal with that place which, in male-dominated Christian history, has been dubbed either most pure or most impure: the mother’s body.

In her poem “Land of the Living,” Norris writes of her own experience menstruating within a monastery, a territory seemingly hostile to such “womanly” things: “Menstruation is primitive, / no getting around that fact, as / I wipe blood from the floor / at 3 A.M. in the monastery guest room, / alone in this community / of sleeping men” (l. 1-6). For Norris, her period, “a monthly flowering / of the not-to-be” (l. 10-11), reminds her of her inability to conceive children. And yet, in the next stanza, she receives an annunciation, as a monk slides down a banister, becoming for a second “an angel—robed,/ without feet—/ all irrepressible joy / and good news” (l. 18-21). The Marian imagery continues as a statue—as in Kidd, a black Madonna—observes the monk’s flight, “expectant as earth just plowed” (l. 23), an image that refers to black Madonna

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34 The famous poem penned by Teresa of Avila emphasizes the way in which Christ’s incarnation continues in human bodies: “Christ has no body now but yours / No hands, no feet on earth but yours / Yours are the eyes with which he looks / compassion on this world. / Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”
statues’ historical role in blessing crops, as well as carrying a sexual connotation and suggesting the fertile ground of a womb (i.e., “expecting,” “pregnant”). The next stanza features a Madonna and child, in a photograph of Norris’s sister and niece, in which “Lili sits like the Christ child / on her mother’s lap” (l. 27-28). Norris herself cannot physically give birth, but she still believes that “It’s here, in the land of the living / the psalm says we shall see God’s goodness” (l. 32-33). Indeed, it is in the land and the circumstances of Norris’s life that she sees goodness, a goodness in particular places and people, a goodness in the birthing and blood and even barrenness of women’s bodies, a goodness reaffirmed by the conception and birth of God as a human. The Incarnation, as a metaphor, balances transcendence and immanence, the global and the local: Norris’s circumstances, though distinct from the nativity of Christ, can embody this divine story in new ways.

In her book *Desperately Seeking Mary: A Feminist Appropriation of a Traditional Religious Symbol*, Dutch theologian Els Maeckelberghe writes, “Mary, on the one hand, is the symbol of one who transcends all classes, and regional and local differences. She enhances a community feeling: everybody comes together in front of her shrine,” which exists in a particular location (39). Indeed, for centuries, pilgrims all over the world have seen in Mary an incarnational metaphor who balances global and local, universal and particular. However, despite Mary’s potential relevance to all classes, we need to remain conscious of difference, as well: it is the poor, more than any others, who have claimed experiences of Marian visitation. What we need to remember, when we use incarnational metaphors involving Mary or Christ, is that incarnation is always shrouded in cultural particulars, and that these cultural particulars will inevitably be different. Thus,
incarnational metaphors for spirituality can become one way of accomplishing what Susan Stanford Friedman has referred to as “locational feminism.” According to Friedman, “Locational feminism pays attention to the specificities of time and place, but unlike fundamentalist identity politics, it is not parochially limited to a single feminist formation and takes as its founding principle the multiplicity of heterogeneous feminist movements and the conditions that produce them” (5). Thinking of the divine as necessarily expressed through particulars helps to prevent us from assuming that our particulars are the same as others’—or from appropriating the particulars of others, since the incarnation grants all particulars equal validity.

Of course, language emphasizing the Incarnation is particular to the Christian faith, and therefore of most relevance to Christian feminists. My hope is that examining incarnation as one particular lens for feminist spirituality will help feminists of other faiths to look to their own particulars to find empowering, yet difference-respecting metaphors. If we acknowledge particular contexts and draw inspiration from them, we will be less likely to assume that there is one single “feminist spirituality” or that our culturally-bound definition of the “sacred feminine” can be imposed onto others. Though Sue Monk Kidd may be trying to honor the spiritual traditions of African American women in her work, she ends up connecting to them to a very white vision of the “sacred feminine”—while claiming that her particular vision is universal. However, if we recognize particulars as valuable in themselves—as Kathleen Norris does in her incarnational spiritual geography—we will be less likely to mistake them for universals. As feminist geographer Caren Kaplan writes, “Exploring all the differences, keeping identities distinct is the only way we can keep power differentials”—differentials of
place, of gender, of religion, of race—“from masquerading as universals”

(“Deterritorializations” 194).
Chapter Four

The Southern Pilgrim *Malgré Lui* in the Works of Flannery O’Connor and Lee Smith

“The only way to recreate a South that is hospitable to the production of great literature is to recapture the sacred. I think, paradoxically perhaps, that the best way to do this is to seek the transcendent outside the ambience of southern imagery because the images of the South, familiar and beloved as they are, tempt us to believe that we have not lost our piety.” –Walter Sullivan, “Southern Writers in Spiritual Exile”

Walter Sullivan, pupil of the Southern Agrarian writer Donald Davidson, believed, in 1990, that the literary connection between the American South and Christianity must change or die. During the years of the Southern Renaissance, the Protestant religious culture of the South underlay the work of Faulkner, Penn Warren, and Welty. According to Sullivan, the inclusion of religious themes in Southern literature was almost an organic growth out of the writer’s environs: “Faulkner began with what he saw and heard, with what his senses told him, and in the shaping of details and sequences, he discovered the southern piety that underlay them” (47). Thus, Faulkner supplies a sense of Old Testament grandeur behind the rise and fall of Thomas Sutpen in *Absalom, Absalom!*. According to Sullivan, however, the contemporary South does not provide the same religious backdrop. Sullivan contends that “under present

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35 It is difficult, especially after the recent rise of “Red State” (conservative, Christian) vs. “Blue State” (liberal, secular) politics, to accept Sullivan’s argument that the South is no longer religious. I would add a caveat to his statement, for it is true that the South is no longer religious *in the same way* as in the early twentieth century. The South is still very religious, yes, but in a way that increasingly insists upon literal,
circumstances, with the sense of the sacred gone, the shaping of details that are specifically southern will lead the writer to think he has done what Faulkner did, but he will not have done so. Rather he will have created work similar to that of Bobbie Ann Mason, whose stories are southern all right but bereft of piety and meaning” (47). Or, like the works of Sue Monk Kidd or Jan Karon, they will display only a very simplistic piety meant to lend credibility to “Southern charm.”

Sue Monk Kidd writes that the “South is not only a geography on a map, but it’s also a peculiar region in the mind which haunts, possesses, confounds, and in some cases, exerts an autonomy that you cannot define or dispute. The South is the most soulful place on earth” (“Journal”). Readers of Sue Monk Kidd’s The Secret Life of Bees—at least the Northern white readers—often enthuse about the novel’s Southern setting. So do the devotees of Jan Karon’s bestselling “Mitford” series, which shares with The Secret Life of Bees an emphasis on “Southern living” and spirituality (though Karon’s churchgoers are a bit more traditional than Kidd’s “Daughters of Mary”). Somehow these readers find religion more believable, appealing, and—well, “natural”—if it appears in a quaint Southern setting. So, thanks to contemporary Southern women’s writing in the Kidd-Karon vein, we have the impression that male writers of the Southern Renaissance dealt with lofty, important—and truly Southern—spiritual matters, while contemporary Southern women writers use “familiar and beloved imagery” to substitute for spiritual depth.

The assertion of a unique religious climate in the South is nothing new for those who study literature. Religion, thick and ever-present as kudzu, is part of what makes the
literary South the place where “place” is enshrined as formative. However, literary critics as a whole have paid far too little attention to the changing nature of religion in the South—and how these changes affect the spiritual geography of Southern literature. It is commonly argued that Southern writers between the 1920s and the 1960s drew their inspiration not only from their environs but also from the Old Testament. Such an emphasis resulted in literature whose themes and interactions with place were largely patriarchal. Much contemporary Southern literature, both by men and women, uses the forms and settings of the patriarchal, Agrarian model, while either romanticizing or completely ignoring the religious element. However, some writers have reinvigorated the spiritual geography of Southern literature by incorporating New Testament themes and images, along with the Old Testament theme of exile (as opposed to typical Agrarian themes of Old Testament kingship or land ownership).

In this chapter, I will explore how Lee Smith’s 1995 novel *Saving Grace* revises the spiritual geography of Southern literature, unshackling it from the patriarchal Agrarian model, and reconnecting it to poor, marginalized New Testament figures such as Mary, the mother of Christ. Smith is not working out of a vacuum, however, as she draws much of her inspiration from her literary foremother Flannery O’Connor. O’Connor criticism of the past twenty years has typically tried to expose the ways in which O’Connor sought to identify herself with male-dominated religious and literary traditions. However, I argue that, in structuring her writing around the New Testament theme of Christ’s Incarnation, O’Connor paved the way for a new, de-patriarchalized Southern spiritual geography. In addition, both O’Connor and Smith recycle the Old Testament trope of exile, spiritual and material exile within the South itself. O’Connor’s
and Smith’s most memorable characters do not own land (or, if they do, they must be “displaced” from it in order to experience spiritual growth): they are pilgrims, sometimes against their will. Through their marginal characters’ wanderings, O’Connor and Smith demonstrate the flexibility of their new Southern geography: an exile can become a pilgrimage, if the pilgrim claims it as such.

In writing a feminist spiritual geography of the South, one of the greatest challenges is accounting for the emphasis on a compelling religious force that characterizes the novels and stories of writers like Flannery O’Connor and Lee Smith, especially when that force (both regional and religious) seems associated with an authoritative masculine figure. In novels like O’Connor’s *The Violent Bear It Away* and Smith’s *Saving Grace*, an unseen power drives the protagonists, without their conscious knowledge or even against their will, to return to a certain place associated with their childhood. Often, just as we assume that the South is religious, we also assume that it is patriarchal—we have visions of slick male preachers telling the women of their congregations to submit to their husbands, for the husband is the spiritual head of the household. With this conflation of region, patriarchy, and religion, it can seem that the power of Southern place derives from the authority of a powerful male god.

What does it mean, then, for a work of Southern literature to feature a female protagonist who is a pilgrim *malgré lui*, a pilgrim in spite of herself, not of her own deliberate choice? And what if that pilgrimage leads her to return home, to what has so often been the site of patriarchal oppression? In what ways can a figure like this contribute to a feminist understanding of autonomy in relation to gender, place, and spirituality?
By reading Lee Smith’s novel *Saving Grace*, whose protagonist Florida Grace Shepherd is a pilgrim *malgré lui*, through the writings of Flannery O’Connor, I hope to question our assumptions that all Southern religion is patriarchal, and that any external compulsion or limit curtails a woman’s freedom. While Gracie is driven in part by something outside her control, that something is not a patriarchal figure, divine or otherwise. It is God—neither male nor female—who is calling Gracie on a pilgrimage home, but God does so through the voice of the mother, calling her child back to the fullness of emplaced and embodied life. Reading Smith and O’Connor in conjunction with each other, we discover a powerful and necessary remedy to feminist mobility theory’s sometimes insensitive emphasis on individual choice. For those who, through exile or disability, lack the freedom to move across space, the inclusion of the pilgrim *malgré lui* in feminist theory about place may supply a fuller perspective. Furthermore, when the mother’s call involves becoming emplaced and embodied in eccentric and marginal ways, we are able to resist the temptation to romanticize the maternal—and, by extension, to resist romanticizing the power of Southern place (whether viewed as maternal or paternal). As such, the female pilgrim *malgré lui* helps us acknowledge the formative influences of body, place, and religion—without succumbing to biological, geographical, or theological determinism.

**The Patriarchal Roots of Agrarian Spiritual Geography**

Though the Southern Agrarians Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and their ilk, are often invoked as merely one example of the vaguely described Southern emphasis on “place,” they in fact had a very specific formula for the ideal “relation of man to place”
(Warren’s phrase, in which he quite literally meant “man”). In his 2005 book *The Postsouthern Sense of Place in Contemporary Fiction*, Martyn Bone seeks to draw attention to the specific material and economic characteristics of the Agrarian ideal: “agricultural real property owned and operated by subsistence farmers” (Bone 28). Allen Tate particularly emphasized the spiritual element of farm ownership in his essay “Remarks on the Southern Religion,” one of the twelve essays comprising the Agrarians’ 1930 manifesto *I’ll Take My Stand*. Tate takes for granted the Agrarian assumption that a feudal sort of economic/social system was organic to the South, a natural outgrowth of the land. However, he argues that the South’s problem was that it did not develop a similarly organic feudal religion. “They had a religious life,” Tate acknowledges:

but it was not organized with a right mythology. In fact, their rational life was not powerfully united to the religious experience, as it was in mediaeval society, and they are a fine specimen of the tragic pitfall upon which the Western mind has always hovered. Lacking a rational system for the defense of their religious attitude and its base in a feudal society, they elaborated no rational system whatsoever, no full-grown philosophy; so that, when the post-bellum temptations of the devil, who is the exploiter of nature, confronted them, they had no defense. (173)

In short, Tate argues that the South should have been Catholic, with a feudal religious hierarchy to match its feudal social hierarchy.

While writers of the Southern Renaissance may not have accepted Tate’s specific argument that Catholicism would have better suited the South, they did draw a connection between religion and the forms of land ownership prominent in the Old South.
As Lewis P. Simpson explains, “To support a historical contingency that had become an economic necessity, southerners tried to conceive their society as a restoration of the sacred community” (256)—the sacred community of Israel, bound to its sacred land, replete with pastoral metaphors. Faulkner especially connected his themes of land ownership and the importance of history and heritage to the Old Testament. According to Jackson, Faulkner adopted “the ancient Hebrew communal sense” to “a modern vision of God’s people in a place where their paradox is to live in a nation at schizophrenic cross-purposes with itself” (110). In Faulkner, however, the themes of inheritance and land ownership are almost exclusively the preoccupations of male characters.

Thanks in part to Richard H. King’s 1980 critical work *A Southern Renaissance: The Cultural Awakening of the South, 1930-1955*—a work that includes no African American writers and almost no female writers—the general portrait of Southern Renaissance writing is that it centers around the “Southern family romance,” “a tradition whose essential figures were the father and grandfather and whose essential structure was the literal and symbolic family” (qtd. in Manning 7). The Southern family romance has its roots in Old Testament portraits of fathers and their squabbling, scheming sons. According to King, women writers did not deal with the “Southern family romance.” This assertion is, of course, blatantly false, as even a cursory reading of Flannery O’Connor’s stories should reveal. However, King’s rather monolithic portrait of “Southern” literature has been influential in inscribing within rather narrow limits Southern writers’ treatment of “place.”

Within the patriarchal setting of the Old Testament and the Old South, women, objectified as bodies, function primarily to secure the relationship between men and
owned place by producing a legitimate heir. In an intensification of Old Testament themes, male-authored literature of the Southern Renaissance, especially Faulkner’s novels *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, are preoccupied with incest. According to Minrose Gwin, these incest tales “reveal how the white father’s power in the southern patriarchal family is produced within and itself reproduces a cultural space that has historically emphasized property ownership and built up an institutionalized system of the containment and usage of women’s bodies to that end” (417). In this version of the Southern literary tradition, women’s connection to place only occurs through their production of a son; their bodies are merely there to insure that the land will remain in the hands of the male members of the family.

I mention this heritage of male-authored, Agrarian-influenced Southern literature not to argue that this portrait of the “Southern Renaissance” is historically accurate, for it is not. It ignores figures like Eudora Welty, who dealt with Southern family dynasties, though usually without the same Old Testament allusions. Rather, I invoke the land-centric “Southern family romance” to suggest why, in the wake of the Southern Renaissance, pilgrimage, rather than land inheritance, might become a powerful spiritual metaphor for Southern women writers. In order to separate themselves from the trope of patriarchal land ownership, in which women are relegated to the role of heir-bearers, women writers like O’Connor and Smith turn to the theme of displacement, whether through involuntary exile or voluntary pilgrimage (and, indeed, as we shall see, they collapse the distinctions between these two categories of movement). By first disconnecting spirituality from owned land, O’Connor and Smith enable their protagonists to reconnect to place in non-patriarchal ways. Pilgrimage partially
accomplishes Walter Sullivan’s goal of separating the sacred from the “sacred cows” of rural Southern place. However, the pilgrimages of O’Connor’s and Smith’s protagonists are in a distinctly Southern vein, for they deal with the experiences of eccentrics and outcasts.

Creating the Pilgrim Malgré Lui: Flannery O’Connor’s Groundwork

In her short essay “A Visit to Milledgeville,” Lee Smith writes:

I would never have been able to write my recent novel, *Saving Grace*, for instance, had I not read Flannery O’Connor. It was in *Wise Blood* that I first came upon the notion of somebody who is a pilgrim “*malgré lui*.” This aw(e)ful concept hit me with the force of a stranger clutching my sleeve. I think of *Saving Grace* as a kind of homage to Flannery O’Connor, in fact, pure and simple. I *had* to read *Wise Blood* again right before I started writing it, and *I had* to visit Milledgeville right in the middle of writing it . . . (102)

Smith’s indebtedness to O’Connor is apparent even to those who have never read this essay. Smith, particularly in *Saving Grace*, is heir to O’Connor’s backwoods, often eccentric Southern characters, though there are significant differences, too: because of Smith’s much more positive portrayals of female characters and of the feminine aspect of God, she can be more easily read from a feminist angle. Nevertheless, because of O’Connor’s influence, both regional and theological, it is essential to understand her concept of the pilgrim *malgré lui* before turning to Smith.
Among O'Connor’s published works, the term “malgré lui” appears in her introduction to the second edition of Wise Blood, published in 1962. She writes, “It is a comic novel about a Christian malgré lui,” and a few sentences later, she explains the complexity of Hazel Motes’ freedom. O’Connor writes that “his integrity lies in his not being able to” rid Jesus from the back of his mind. “Does one’s integrity ever lie in what he is not able to do?” she asks. “I think that it usually does, for free will does not mean one will, but many wills conflicting in one man. Freedom cannot be conceived simply” (MM 115). Freedom may indeed be brought about through limitation—and, indeed, through exile.

The term malgré lui can be misunderstood as implying that a character has no free will. However, both Hazel Motes and young Tarwater, the protagonist of O’Connor’s second novel, The Violent Bear It Away, demonstrate choice among many conflicting—and some inexplicable—wills. While Tarwater’s redemption comes through acknowledging that there are spiritual powers, both the devil and the Lord God, that exert influence over him, he exhibits free will throughout the novel by struggling against his prophetic vocation and then ultimately choosing it. A pilgrim malgré lui is not deprived of choice; rather, she is one who initially struggles against classifying her own journey as a pilgrimage. O’Connor responds explicitly to the charge that Rayber’s and Tarwater’s actions are predetermined in an August 1962 letter to Alfred Corn:

I think the strongest of Rayber’s psychological pulls are in the direction that he does not ultimately choose, so I don’t believe he exhibits in any sense a lack of free will. You might make out a case of sorts for Tarwater being determined since his great uncle has expressly trained him to be a
prophet and to expect the Lord’s call, but actually neither of them exhibits a lack of free will. An absence of freewill in these characters would mean an absence of conflict in them, whereas they spend all their time fighting within themselves, drive against drive. Tarwater wrestles with the Lord and Rayber wins. Both examples of free will in action. (HB 488)

In the same letter, O’Connor then continues on to relate the free will discussion to her own position within the Catholic Church: “Free will has to be understood within its limits; possibly we all have some hindrances to free action but not enough to be able to call the world determined . . . So you can see that I don’t find it an infringement of my independence for the Church to tell me what is true and what is not in regard to faith and what is right and what is wrong in regard to morals.” This echoes a statement she had penned several years earlier, in a November 6, 1955, letter to John Lynch: “I have never had the sense that being a Catholic is a limit to the freedom of the writer, but just the reverse” (HB 114). For O’Connor, limitations do not exclude the possibility of free choice. Thus, when she writes to Cecil Dawkins that “vocation implies limitation” (HB 221), she is not lamenting the writer’s lack of freedom, but rather explaining the conditions of that freedom. Tarwater, too, comes to accept that his vocation is both limiting and freeing at once. It condemns him to a marginal existence, but this marginality connects him to the tradition of both Old Testament prophets and the New Testament prophet John the Baptist, who receive great spiritual honor in the Christian tradition, in spite of their poverty, landlessness, and eccentricity.

Powderhead, the clearing where “old Tarwater” raises his great-nephew “young Tarwater,” is at first seen by both young Tarwater and Rayber as a place to be owned.
After Tarwater’s great-uncle dies, the boy tries to focus on his role as heir of the land—in other words, he attempts to align himself with Old Testament kingship rather than with Old Testament prophecy. Tarwater immediately fears that Rayber will try to come and claim the property that is now legally his: “I own it, Tarwater said, because I’m here and can’t nobody get me off. If any schoolteacher comes to claim the property, I’ll kill him” (VBI 130). Yet Tarwater’s instincts immediately remind him that he is not even entirely his own person: “The Lord may send you off, he thought” (130). Trying to claim ownership of the land is one way of trying to resist the power the place can exert, but Tarwater also recognizes that divine will may be accomplished through sending him away from Powderhead, for the place, as later chapters indicate, exerts a power even in the city. For the pilgrim malgré lui, there are many roads, all possibly leading to the same end; yet all of them involve submitting to place, rather than claiming it as property.

Actually, both Tarwater and Rayber try to resist the growth of Jesus-madness within themselves in the same way: by trying to exert ownership over the natural world, in an attempt to silence the promptings of love they feel toward it. At Powderhead, Tarwater feels threatened by his unexpected love for his ordinary surroundings:

It was as if he were afraid if he let his eye rest for an instant longer than was needed to place something—a spade, a hoe, the mule’s hind quarters before his plow, the red furrow under him—that the thing would suddenly stand before him, strange and terrifying, demanding that he name it and name it justly and be named for the name he gave it. He did all he could to avoid this threatened intimacy of creation. (136)
Rayber faces the danger of this overwhelming love most powerfully when he looks at his mentally handicapped son Bishop, but other natural sights can arouse it, too:

Anything he looked at too long could bring it on. Bishop did not have to be around. It could be a stick or a stone, the line of a shadow, the absurd old man’s walk of a starling crossing the sidewalk. If, without thinking, he lent himself to it, he would feel suddenly a morbid surge of the love that terrified him—powerful enough to throw him to the ground in an act of idiot praise. (192)

Rayber, too, knows the unique power of Powderhead to bring internal tensions to the surface.

Like young Tarwater, Rayber tries to quell the power of the place by asserting ownership over it: “Suddenly he realized that the place was his. In the stress of having the boy return to him, he had never considered the property. He stopped, astounded by the fact that he owned all of this. . . . Quickly he reduced the whole wood in probable board feet into a college education for the boy [Tarwater]. His spirits lifted” (232). However, Bishop then comes to stand beside his father, and when Rayber looks down at him, love once again threatens to overwhelm his sense of ownership and control. He knows he “could not stay [t]here an instant longer” without it overtaking him (233). He leaves, vowing never to return, and yet Powderhead as a place continues to exert power over him. As Tarwater and Bishop are out together in the boat, Rayber waits, recalling that he “had had this sense of waiting, kin in degree but not in kind, when he was a child and expected any moment that the city would blossom into an eternal Powderhead. Now he sensed that he waited for a cataclysm. He waited for all the world to be turned into a
burnt spot between two chimneys‖ (241). Powderhead, that burnt spot between two chimneys, contains the world for him, even though he fails to admit it. Tarwater, however, ultimately submits to Powderhead and to his own body\textsuperscript{36} and, as a result, he takes Powderhead with him when he returns to the city as a pilgrim-prophet.

Tension between limitation and freedom, as expressed through the power of place, characterizes not only \textit{The Violent Bear It Away}, but the nature of pilgrimages as well. In their classic work \textit{Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture}, Victor and Edith Turner explain that pilgrimages involve the choice to freely submit one’s will to the will of God. “Inside the Christian religious frame,” they write, “pilgrimage may be said to represent the quintessence of voluntary liminality. In this, again, they follow the paradigm of the \textit{via crucis}, in which Jesus Christ voluntarily submitted his will to the will of God and chose martyrdom rather than mastery over man, death \textit{for} the other, not death \textit{of} the other” (9-10). One could make the literal physical journey of the pilgrimage without making this choice. And even without making a journey from place to place, a “pilgrim” can choose this conformation of the individual will to the divine will, even if external conditions—whether bodily limitations or geographical or economic ones—seem to have predetermined the loss of one’s will.

Such a vision of free will differs substantially not only from Calvinist predetermination but also from much feminist theory about autonomy. For example, feminist philosopher Beate Rössler has written, “a person is autonomous only if she

\textsuperscript{36} Upon reaching Powderhead, Tarwater makes one last attempt to claim the place, rather than the wandering vocation associated with it, as his own: “The clearing was burned free of all that had ever oppressed him. No cross was there to say that this was ground that the Lord still held. What he looked out on was forsaken and his own” (264). Yet, as he stands there, his body brings him to an awareness of his lack of self-sufficiency: “He became conscious of the very breath he drew. Even the air seemed to belong to another” (265). The place is not really his own at all, nor is his body.
reflects upon how she wishes to live, upon the person she wants to be, and then both lives and is allowed to live in that chosen way, such that she as an individual is able authentically to identify with her own goals and projects, as well as being actually able to pursue them” (146-7). This definition of autonomy has several features that would make it difficult for many women, even feminists, to claim that they are autonomous. We do not always consciously know our own goals, even if we are physically and economically able to pursue them. A pilgrim malgré lui may or may not have a goal along every step of the journey. If she has a goal, chances are it does not involve the place at which she arrives, for she does not even know she is on a pilgrimage. Tarwater, for example, thinks that, by going to the city, he will escape his call to be a prophet; however, the city is merely the means by which he returns to his childhood home at Powderhead, where he ultimately chooses to accept his vocation. The problem with Rössler’s definition of autonomy is that it relies too much upon human consciousness. Could one even be an autonomous individual if one has mental or psychological disabilities? What about physical disabilities, which allow the individual to remain conscious but which may severely limit the realm of possible choices for that person? This definition of autonomy is far too restrictive, as O’Connor’s own life illustrates.

O’Connor may have seemed to lose some of her freedom when she developed lupus and had to move home to her mother’s farm. However, she voluntarily embraced the limitations of her debilitated physical condition and thus became a pilgrim. In a June 1956 letter to her friend Elizabeth Hester, she wrote, “In a sense sickness is a place, more instructive than a long trip to Europe, and it’s a place where there’s no company, where nobody can follow” (HB 163). Her vocation as a disabled writer is as lonely as
Tarwater’s prophetic vocation—and yet, when freely accepted, as potentially powerful.
O’Connor’s perspective on vocation and limitation helps to address an often unconscious insensitivity among feminists who emphasize the importance of individual choice for women. As Rosemary Garland Thomson writes, “An equality model of feminist theory sometimes prizes individualistic autonomy as the key to women’s liberation. A feminist disability theory, however, suggests that we are better off learning to individually and collectively accommodate bodily limits and evolutions than trying to eliminate or deny them” (21). Bodily limitation happens in some degree to all of us: O’Connor experienced it in her lack of physical (and therefore geographical) mobility. Viewing physical limitation as a pilgrimage, a journey through place, shows that being such a pilgrim, even an unwilling pilgrim, does not render one helpless.

When O’Connor wrote that “sickness is a place,” she located her own body as a destination of pilgrimage. For O’Connor, the human body is a site of transformation and redemption, though both of these occur in startling and often violent ways in her stories. The importance of the body in her fiction is a reflection of Christ’s incarnation, the divine becoming a human body in a particular place on earth, which validates all human bodies and all particular places as potentially sacred space. However, in O’Connor’s stories, incarnation first has to displace characters from their closed-off little territories before they can become emplaced within their own bodies and communities. As Christina Bieber Lake writes, “For the Incarnation as fulcrum is not a balancing fulcrum but a displacing one, and the displacement is always by means of an actual body. Bodies in O’Connor stories serve always to remind characters and readers of what the Incarnation validates—the inescapable reality of human embodiment” (9). O’Connor characters have
to fully occupy their own bodies, in all their bodily limitations, before they can become wholly open to the other, whether divine or human. Such is the case with Joy/Hulga Hopewell of O’Connor’s short story “Good Country People.” Hulga, like O’Connor, is a well educated adult woman who has returned to her mother’s farm. Also like O’Connor, Hulga is marked by disability; because of an accident when she was ten years old, she has to wear a wooden leg. When the Bible salesman, in an intimate moment, persuades her to surrender her leg to him, she realizes, for once, that she is not completely independent (as none of us truly are): “It was like losing her life and finding it, again, miraculously, in his” (CS 289). That the salesman is unworthy of her trust matters little here, for he, without his own knowledge, becomes an instrument of grace. Hulga, left alone without her leg, comes face to face with the limitations of her human body. Once acknowledging the limits of embodiment, she has the potential to become more open to the others around her, more capable of living life in community. According to Lake, Hulga’s refusal of her given name, Joy, has been “a refusal to acknowledge that she is actually dependent upon the communal and corporeal world her mother’s body represents” (128). “O’Connor’s answer,” Lake writes, “is that of the incarnational artist: she drags Joy back through her own body” (129). Left immobile on the floor, she begins her journey as a pilgrim malgré lui. Of course, because this is an O’Connor story, we only see Hulga at the moment of realization—we don’t know what she will choose to do with it. However, O’Connor has transformed the human body—even the apparently “disfigured” human body—into a

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37 Louise Westling believes that Hulga loses her wooden leg because O’Connor is punishing her, as Westling believes she punishes all intelligent or powerful female characters. She writes, “The perverse ‘grace’ that Manley Pointer supplies is a destruction of the daughter’s dignity and ability to walk alone” (“Fathers” 117). Westling, however, is missing the importance of Hulga’s re-connection with her body—and, by implication, with female community.
destination for pilgrimage, thus making pilgrimage more accessible to those who lack physical mobility.

Similarly, one of the major results of O’Connor’s confinement to her mother’s farm outside Milledgeville, Georgia, was that O’Connor transformed “home” into a potential destination for pilgrimage, as well as a site of displacement. Despite her fragile physical condition, O’Connor had made a literal pilgrimage to Europe in the spring of 1958. A cousin insisted on providing the trip to Lourdes for O’Connor and her mother, but O’Connor, though a devout Catholic, was reluctant to go. She wrote to Elizabeth Hester in December 1957, “About the Lourdes business. I am going as a pilgrim, not a patient. I will not be taking any bath. I am one of those people who could die for his religion easier than take a bath for it” (HB 258). Even though she called herself a pilgrim, she had little confidence that the trip to Europe would produce any unique spiritual benefit: “By my calculations we should see more airports than shrines, and I suspect that if you’ve seen one shrine you’ve seen them all. Aside from penance being a good thing for us, I’m sure religion can be served as well at home” (258). Perhaps O’Connor particularly felt this way because she already viewed her illness as a kind of pilgrimage, a pilgrimage that could be accomplished at home.

However, when O’Connor visited Lourdes, she actually did bathe in the waters, though she claimed her motivation was to keep her relatives from being disappointed. A few months later, she even was willing to entertain the possibility that Lourdes had resulted in the partial healing of her hip: “Big news for me. The doctor says my hip bone is recalcifying. He is letting me walk around the room and for short spaces without the crutches. If it continues to improve, I may be off them in a year or so. Maybe this is
Lourdes. Anyway, it’s something to be thankful to the same Source for” \((HB \ 305)\). Yet another possible result of Lourdes was even more exciting to O’Connor: by January of 1959, she had almost completed the first draft of \textit{The Violent Bear It Away}. She wrote to Hester, “I must say I attribute this to Lourdes more than the recalcifying bone. Anyway it means more to me” \((HB \ 316)\). Pilgrimage was clearly on her mind at the time she wrote her second novel. However, given her own preferences, she once again transformed the destination of pilgrimage, making the homeplace (not necessarily a house) a sacred site. Tarwater, against his will, returns home to Powderhead, where he is transformed and prepared to journey out again. When O’Connor writes that “religion can be served as well at home,” she means it, but the homes in her novels and stories are always unsettling places. Carla Verderame suggests that this is particularly true for O’Connor’s female characters: “for O’Connor’s women, home can suggest the same displacement as the outside world because O’Connor characterizes the home as a site of dysfunction” \(141\).

Though Verderame emphasizes the female characters’ (such as Hulga Hopewell’s) return home as “disempowerment,” for both Tarwater and characters like Mrs. McIntyre of “The Displaced Person” this disempowerment leads to spiritual transformation—a transformation that makes them more open to place and to displaced others.

Are O’Connor’s homes fortresses of patriarchy, though? The farms in her stories are often initially controlled by women, but these women are often “displaced” or knocked down from a position of power—or dead—by the end of a story. Louise Westling claims, “Flannery O’Connor’s vision could not countenance a feminine landscape controlled by the strong mother figures of the farm stories, for her world was ruled by a patriarchal authority which guarded His pastoral landscape as the Yahweh of
the ancient Hebrews watched over Eden and the pastures of the Old Testament” (qtd. in Donahoo 9). Westling’s focus here is on which has control and ownership of land; however, O’Connor’s protagonists, both male and female, are disrupted and displaced when they desperately try to maintain their control of the land. (And this pattern in O’Connor contradicts King’s thesis, previously mentioned, that Southern women writers have not dealt with the issues of land ownership and inheritance that characterize the “Southern family romance—but, unlike many of her male predecessors and contemporaries, O’Connor also deals with displacement and exile.)

“The Displaced Person,” in particular among the O’Connor stories depicting controlling women presiding over farms, has troubled feminist critics because of the divine justice that Mrs. McIntyre receives—divine justice assumed to be meted out because she has overstepped the proper limits of female authority. Westling argues, “Flannery O’Connor tells story after story of strong mothers who must be punished by masculine authority for their attempts to control the world around them” (Westling, Sacred 5). However, Mrs. McIntyre is “punished” (and we have to remember here that when O’Connor’s characters suffer, they begin to see the depth of their own ugliness—which is a step along the path to redemption, and not a punishment) not for overstepping the bounds of her “place,” but for failing to open that place to the Other, the Displaced Person, who is at once both Christ and Mr. Guizac. In fact, Mr. Guizac is one of the first manifestations in O’Connor’s fiction of a character who, as an exile, is literally a pilgrim malgré lui, a wanderer not by his own choice. Mrs. McIntyre keeps emphasizing that “Mr. Guizac didn’t have to come here in the first place” (226), but this assertion is merely a way of shirking her responsibility. Yet after her denial of responsibility leads to Mr.
Guizac’s death, she suddenly finds herself “displaced”: “She felt she was in some foreign country where the people bent over the body were natives, and she watched like a stranger while the dead man was carried away in the ambulance” (235). Only after Mrs. McIntyre has been displaced can she find her way “home” to a place of humility and openness toward others. As O’Connor wrote to Hester, “The displaced person did accomplish a kind of redemption in that he destroyed the place, which was evil, and set Mrs. MacIntyre on the road to a new kind of suffering” (HB 118, italics mine). Mrs. McIntyre begins her own pilgrimage, which O’Connor connects to a kind of Purgatory, or atonement for her previous sins. The ultimate end of this journey is redemption.

The journey of displacement that Mrs. McIntyre must take is familiar to many of O’Connor’s central characters, male or female. Though O’Connor does not go as far as Smith in mediating the divine force through the female, it is important to acknowledge—as far too few critics have done—that O’Connor’s God, who prompts characters to journey from place to place, is powerful but not necessarily patriarchal. The divine force leading Tarwater and Smith’s Gracie on their pilgrimages is, most importantly, a force that brings them to a heightened awareness of their embodiment, both in their physical bodies and in place. And, as we all know, being a body—and being formed by a place—means that we do not always have complete choice or control over our actions.

To place home as the destination of a pilgrimage malgré lui is also to begin to question the power of region in the pilgrim’s life. In her early twenties, O’Connor felt that she needed to be “free” from the influence of place in order to be an autonomous writer. During the five years that she spent in Iowa, New York City, and Connecticut, O’Connor believed that, in order to write about the South, she could no longer live there.
As she later wrote to fellow Southerner Cecil Dawkins, “I stayed away from the time I was 20 until I was 25 with the notion that the life of my writing depended on my staying away.” O’Connor continues, “I would certainly have persisted in that delusion had I not got very ill and had to come home. The best of my writing has been done here” (HB 230). When, in 1950, the onset of lupus caused O’Connor to return to the South, she initially dreaded the move home. As she wrote (in retrospect) to another Southern friend, “This is a Return I have faced and when I faced it I was roped and tied and resigned the way it is necessary to be resigned to death, and largely because I thought it would be the end of any creation, any writing, any WORK from me. And as I told you by the fence, it was only the beginning” (HB 224).

In several of her letters from the mid-fifties until her death in 1964, O’Connor urged these friends, Cecil Dawkins and Maryat Lee, to return to the South, for the sake of their writing. She explained her motivation in a letter to a third friend, Elizabeth Hester: “In my opinion Cecil needs to live in the dear old dirty Southland and have more contact with the things she hates” (HB 461). Though she wrote that sentence with typical O’Connor sharpness, she explained her real meaning more fully in letters to Dawkins herself: “I don’t mean by this that you should come home and write ‘Southern,’ but only that you should be where you belong for a while, a part of a society that has some real extension outside of the mind” (HB 493). Another letter to Hester, written a few days later, reveals that by “a society that has some real extension outside of the mind,” O’Connor means, at least in part, a community to which the writer is accountable. She explains that “awards are valuable in direct ratio to how near they come from home. . . . What I really mean is, and what is true, is that the writer’s check of himself is local where
place still has meaning” (*HB* 494-5). In her essay “The Regional Writer,” she elaborates, “The isolated imagination is easily corrupted by theory, but the writer inside his community seldom has such a problem. To call yourself a Georgia writer is certainly to declare a limitation, but one which, like all limitations, is a gateway to reality” (*MM* 54). In other words, O’Connor believes that a writer must have a dialogic relationship with her home-place. She must allow it a voice, a role in shaping her; she cannot escape the influence of place, but she can choose how to respond to that influence.

Reframing home—both bodily homes and regional homes—as a site of pilgrimage, a site of transformation, gives power to those physically confined to home, at the same time that it humbles those, like Mrs. McIntyre, intent upon drawing controlling boundaries around home. Home, neither idealized nor patriarchal, can suddenly appear as a new place to the pilgrim *malgré lui*. As T.S. Eliot wrote in *Four Quartets*, “And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time.” This *Four Quartets* passage appears as the epigraph to Lee Smith’s 1995 novel *Saving Grace*, a work clearly influenced by Flannery O’Connor’s vision of home and pilgrimage.

“*And Grace Will Lead Me Home*”: *Saving Grace* and the Pilgrimage Home

In “A Visit to Milledgeville,” when Lee Smith writes of the connection between writing her novel and visiting her literary foremother’s hometown ("I had to read *Wise Blood* again right before I started writing it, and I had to visit Milledgeville right in the middle of writing it . . .” (102)), she uses the language of compulsion. In reality, her “pilgrimage” to Milledgeville was of course a matter of her own choice. Though she does
not comment here on the irony of making a pilgrimage to a place associated with a creator of pilgrims *malgré lui*, no doubt she is aware of it. Smith’s protagonist Florida Grace Shepherd, however, is moved primarily against her will. Throughout the first part of her life, she is propelled from place to place by the men in her life, men who view themselves as acting with the authority of God. However, through all of these trials, she is finally called home to the place she most powerfully associated with her mother, Fannie Shepherd—and though this call comes from a divine force outside of her, it is mediated through her mother’s voice.

Though she is named in part for a place—“My name is Florida Grace Shepherd, Florida for the state I was born in, Grace for the Grace of God” (3)—Gracie spends the early years of her life traveling from place to place with her itinerant preacher father, her mother, and her siblings. Because she is a child, she has no choice in the matter. Her father, Virgil Shepherd, does not believe in the importance of place: Christian life, according the message he preaches, does not value the things of this world. As he declares to Carlton Duty, “As it says in the good Bible, this world is not our home, we’re only passing through. We’re follering the plan of God, brother, and we have given our lives over to Him. He is leading us where He wants us to go, and today he has brung us to—“ Here Daddy paused and narrowed his eyes and asked, “What place is this?” (9). The particular place does not matter to him, as long as he is following “God’s will.” Gracie resents their restless life, and since her father has attributed their lifestyle to the will of Jesus, she resents Jesus too: “I loved Daddy and Mama, but I did not love Jesus.

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38 There is a pun on place and spirituality in this sentence; Christians have sometimes used the phrase “state of grace” to identify an individual as “saved.” Though Gracie does not view herself as being in a state of grace for much of her life, the tense of the novel’s title (“Saving Grace”) implies that her salvation is an ongoing process—a pilgrimage—not a fixed, predetermined condition.
And I actually hated Him when He made us take up traveling in His name, living with strangers and in tents and in old school buses and what have you” (4). Furthermore, Gracie can’t stand Jesus because she views him as either trying to injure or steal away her mother. Gracie has always been glad that her mother, unlike her father, has not been “anointed” to handle snakes, and when she sees Fannie pick up burning coals for the first time, Gracie gets mad at Jesus. “I hate Jesus! I hate Jesus!” she thinks, “because he was burning my mother.” It is no consolation to her when Fannie tries to explain that “it was a perfect pleasure in the Lord” (26). For Gracie, Jesus is what threatens to take away her mother and her home.

Unlike her father, Gracie does appreciate the spiritual power of particular places, as she discovers most powerfully when the family settles down for a few years at Scrabble Creek. Gracie tells us, “My best memories come from Scrabble Creek. This is where we lived the longest, in the house God gave us when I was seven years old” (5). She explains, “The fact is, I felt safe in that house on Scrabble Creek, the safest I ever felt in childhood. I was raised to believe that the things of this world are not important, and I know it is true, but a house is different. A house will give you a place on the earth. If you know where you live, you know who you are. I loved being the girl who lived in the house by the musical creek . . .” (14). The house and the place surrounding it give Gracie a sense of unique identity: they make her feel like she is a child of God on this earth, not just a child of God in heaven. She longs for a material sign that she is not an exile. Unlike O’Connor’s Mrs. McIntyre, Gracie does not need to be displaced, for, despite her geography-derived first name, she has never been emplaced until her family settles—in an abandoned house, not one to which they possess formal title—at Scrabble Creek.
Yet Scrabble Creek, the place Gracie remembers as “home,” is also the setting for some of the most traumatic events of Gracie’s childhood—events that, as regrettable as they are, also form her identity: poverty, her sister’s mental disabilities, molestation by her half-brother, and finally her mother’s suicide. Gracie cannot entirely choose all the experiences that make up her sacred place, but when, much later, she chooses to embrace that place—and in doing so, embraces both herself and Jesus—it transforms her. As O’Connor writes about coming to terms with Southern heritage, “The image of the South, in all its complexity, is so powerful in us that it is a force which has to be encountered and engaged. The writer must wrestle with it, like Jacob and the angel, until he has extracted a blessing” (MM 198). The power of the homeplace is strong, but not deterministic.

Unlike some of O’Connor’s characters, the adolescent Gracie is open to nature: she does not seek to own or control it. When she experiences divine presence, it comes through wind or rain or other natural forces. At the climactic “Homecoming” revival (which, ironically, is what ultimately leads to Gracie leaving her home at Scrabble Creek), Gracie at first feels moved by being outdoors in an unfamiliar situation:

> The wind came off the river and moved through the trees. The green leaves of June shimmered softly in the big circle cast by the light, and I thought all of a sudden that it was God’s breath—God’s breath touching the leaves, and touching each one of us. I guess I was not used to being outside in the nighttime like that, for there was something about it that really got to me. I felt like I was being caught up and held in something beautiful and solemn and grand. (103)
Gracie’s sense of sacred place is different from her father’s, for she grants value to the place on its own merit, while, for Virgil Shepherd, the place has value because of its connection to another sacred place. “For I say unto you tonight, beloved, the Spirit is as real right here and now on the banks of the Little Dove River as it ever was on the shores of Galilee” (105). For Gracie, who says she does not love Jesus, comparison to the place where Jesus walked holds little appeal. She is more inclined to experience God directly through place, rather than from a derivative value assigned to that place.

Later that night, she experiences God’s presence in a way she resents, and, again, she assigns this disagreeable intervention to Jesus, the wandering teacher, rather than to a relatively “immobile,” dependable God. In her sleep, unbeknownst to her, she prophesies aloud, according to several witnesses. She doesn’t want to believe that she was compelled in this way, but one of the congregants tells her, “Sissy, we do not always have a choice in these things . . . The Lord goes where He chooses, and visits those He loves” (107). Gracie thinks to herself, “I did not want to be visited by Jesus in the night. I did not want to be visited by Jesus at all, and was terrified that He might return” (107). Jesus scares her, not only because, like the wind, he blows where he will, but because she fears that he will blow her on a course not of her own choosing.

What ends up propelling her to leave home, against her will, is her mother’s suicide. Gracie, numb and with few options, decides to travel the roads again with her father. As she leaves home, she fixes the place in her mind, immutable as a rock:

I didn’t look back once. I didn’t need to.

For I had my own picture of the house on the hill by Scrabble Creek which I had loved, my own picture safe in my mind already, like the
little scene in the miraculous Easter egg which Marie Royal had kept on top of the dresser in her bedroom. . . . The scene never, ever changed. Each time I peeped in, it was always the same. Our early years in the wonderful house on Scrabble Creek seemed to me perfect and everlasting in that same way, and I loved to think about them, peeping into the egg in my mind whenever I chose, as Daddy and I traveled the South. (118)

At this stage of her life, Gracie, quite understandably, craves stability, and she doesn’t want to allow place to change. Her image of God is similar to her “Easter egg” vision of place: she sees “Him as a great rock, eternal and unchanging” (164), a welcome contrast to her father’s wandering and hypocrisy.

Yet Gracie’s disgust with all that is in flux also points to her troubled relationship not only with place, but also with her own body. Her idealization of the unchanging suggests that she has trouble reconciling her own female body, with its menstrual cycles, with God’s nature. This is by no means a new problem, but one all too unfortunately familiar in Christian history. As feminist theologians Lisa Isherwood and Elizabeth Stuart point out:

what has disturbed [male] theologians and philosophers most about women’s bodies is their state of constant flux and change, and which was taken to symbolize disorder and chaos that constantly threatens to engulf and destroy patriarchal, sacred order. Women shared this flaw with all matter. This belief was dynamically interrelated with a construction of the divine as a static, unchangeable god of law and order who is ultimately pure spirit. (81)
Before Gracie’s “fall” into self-consciousness about her body, she revels in climbing Chimney Rock on her own. At the top, hot from climbing, she strips off her shirt and feels no shame. “I didn’t know I was going to do it before it was done,” she says. “The wind felt great on my chest and back. I reached up and took off the rubber band that held my ponytail, and let the wind blow all my hair around” (58). The wind, which Gracie usually connects with God’s presence, has no problem touching her: Gracie here feels that her body brings her closer to the divine, rather than separating her from it. Yet after her half-brother Lamar arrives at Scrabble Creek, she begins to feel “real embarrassed and real nervous . . . I felt his dark eyes on me through my clothes” (79). Lamar begins molesting her, and she enjoys the physical experience, but this only heightens her guilt after her mother’s suicide. Gracie blames herself and her body for all that has happened, and she sends herself into exile from home as a kind of penance. She is not yet aware that her exile will one day be part of her pilgrimage.

During her years of traveling with her father, Gracie wrestles to find out how much control she has over where she goes. Virgil hands her the map, but she isn’t allowed to make any decisions: “God will tell us where He wants us to go,” he explains, “but He needs for you to be His navigator” (122). Gracie, though she doesn’t yet resist it, realizes that there is something patriarchal going on here, and that that something creates an association between her father and God. “I was an instrument of Daddy, the way he was an instrument of God,” she says (121). She has no direct access to the divine; at this point, given her shame over what she perceives as her responsibility for her mother’s death, she believes she is unworthy of God’s attention. Even when it comes time to perform her appointed task of navigation, she is rebuffed: “‘It don’t matter,’ Daddy said.
‘Everplace is the same in the sight of God, Gracie, and He’s the one in charge here. You’re on the way to Heaven, and that’s all you need to know’” (127). “But I thought I got to be the navigator!” Gracie replies. She then realizes “that maybe Daddy had just said that to make me think I was important, that neither God nor Daddy either one had any real use for me.” However, place—and knowing her location—are important to Gracie, and she is indignant at being denied this responsibility: “I liked being the navigator, I liked the dots and the spiderwebby lines of the roads that connected them. I needed to know where we were on the map” (127). Soon after this conversation, she secretly learns to drive, even though she knows her father disapproves of women driving. She becomes free from her father’s directional control, apparently free to make her own choices about where to go; later, however, she will believe that a divine force has been guiding her throughout her life. Her decisions are her own, but she doesn’t necessarily know where they will lead. She is the navigator, but there is no map that would give her a larger sense of where she is on her pilgrimage.

Even once Gracie and her father part ways, she does not want to go back to Scrabble Creek. At this point in the pilgrimage she doesn’t yet know she’s on, she can’t imagine her journey involving a return—only going forward. She explains, “I simply thought that I had come too far along the road that I was on, to turn back now. I had to keep on going” (150). The novel’s next section, “I Settle Down,” deals with Gracie’s attempts to create a home by marrying and having children with the legalistic preacher Travis Word. Though she describes this stage of her life as “living in a paradise,” she also, in retrospect, describes herself as foreordained to leave it—and yet, at the same time, responsible for her choice. She describes the arrival of the aptly named Randy
Newhouse, with whom she has an affair, “as if it was meant to be” (214), and tells the reader, “I was going to do what I was going to do long before I even knew I was going to do it” (223). Here her expulsion from “Eden” seems to be predestined, though also at the same time a consequence of her own choice. Yet when Randy tells her that he believes “that what is meant to be will be,” she responds with a defense of free choice: “‘Well, I don’t,’ I snapped, for I still believed in choices and responsibility, even though I knew I was going to Hell for what I had done” (232).

Gracie’s new life with Randy takes her away from the peace and quiet of farm life with Travis Word, away from anything green. As she rides away in the car with Randy, from her former home to her new one, she observes: “all the scenery of my life flowed backward past my open window, mountainside and fields giving way to open highway and then filling stations and 7-Elevens and then housing developments and strip malls” (232). Because of Gracie’s choices, for which she takes responsibility, her pilgrimage takes her into this concrete-paved environment, before she can return to the natural environment in which she has felt God’s presence before. Gracie lives for several years with Randy in the “Creekside Green” apartments, where there is no creek and no green, before she is ready to begin her journey home.

Gracie’s discovery that Randy is having an affair with another woman is what gets her literally on the road, searching for him. However, once she is on the road, a bizarre encounter launches a more intense phase of her spiritual pilgrimage, calling her home. After pulling off at “Uncle Slidell’s Diner (A Christian Restaurant),” Gracie hears a baby’s cry. “If you have ever been a mother,” she says, “you cannot stand to hear such a cry” (247). She clearly associates the cry with her own experience of motherhood,
particularly with her baby son, who died just after birth. Yet, as her journey continues, she will associate this experience with her own mother and with the Virgin Mary, mother to the divine Christ.

Gracie follows the sound of the cry behind the restaurant to the putt-putt course (named Uncle Slidell’s Christian Fun Golf). “THE LOVE TOUR STARTS HERE,” proclaims a sign at the beginning of the course, and indeed something about this place leads Gracie to start a “tour” that will end in a reclamation of her mother’s—and of God’s—love. She follows the course through several depictions of Old Testament events, all the time following the cry. She finally locates its source:

And then finally I was there, Number Ten, The First Christmas, with enormous plyboard cutouts of the Wise Men and ceramic barnyard animals such as chickens and ducks and a sign that said TO:YOU FROM:GOD and the whole heavenly host of angels hanging from a clothesline over the manger. Dirty snow dripped into His face as He lay in Mary’s lap, but the glory of God shone all around as He held out His chubby little arms to me, still crying.

Biblical minigolf courses do indeed exist in the South, and Timothy Beal elaborates on their significance for pilgrims and tourists (recognizing that a tourist may even be a pilgrim malgré lui): “The sacred, which is radically other than the profane, is revealed in and through the profane. . . . Radical otherness is revealed in and through sameness, the extraordinary through the ordinary, the transcendent through the immanent. Biblical minigolf has to be one of the most remarkable illustrations of this fundamental paradox of the sacred in American leisure culture” (82). Because of the odd combination of leisure
and religious contemplation that is expected of visitors to a biblical minigolf course, these sites can even collapse the distinction between tourist and pilgrim. Significantly, it is on Uncle Slidell’s Christian Fun Golf course that Gracie begins to realize she is already on a pilgrimage.

Here Jesus, whom Gracie has resented all her life, appears to her as a vulnerable baby, and, among all the kitsch, the glory of God shines all around for her. Jesus, for the first time, rather than being aligned with her father, appeals to Gracie’s maternal sense. Moreover, Mary is an important symbol for Gracie’s eventual re-connection to the spirituality of her body and of place. Historically, Mary has of course been used in troubling ways by a male-dominated church: either she is ignored, or she is made into a role model of “purity” and motherhood that is impossible for women to achieve. Because Gracie has been raised as a Protestant, it is unlikely that she has heard much at all about Mary; certainly she never reports any conversations about Mary from her childhood. However, as contemporary feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether has suggested, Mary can be a powerful symbol affirming the goodness of women’s embodiment. Through pregnancy and childbirth, she, in cooperation with God, brings into the world the Incarnate Christ. God becoming flesh inside a woman’s womb affirms that women’s bodies are not dirty: Jesus does not enter the world in an abstract way, like Athena springing full-formed from Zeus’s head, but rather through messy, bloody, normal human childbirth. Furthermore, Mary is not merely a passive “recipient” of the divine seed: “Mary embodies the co-creatorship between God and humanity (see Luke’s Magnificat). She shows a receptivity that has nothing to do with powerless passivity and
self-abnegation. Mary’s ‘yes’ to God is a free act of faith. Mary can be a liberating symbol if she is [17] seen from this angle” (Maeckelberge 16-17).

Mary’s “Magnificat,” her song of praise to God for lifting up the lowly and casting down the mighty, for reversing human hierarchies, is also reflected in the place where she gives birth to Jesus: in a stable. The stable is not unlike Uncle Slidell’s Christian Fun Golf course, for it reflects life on the margins, life among the poor who are given value through God’s becoming incarnate among them. Marginal places such as these are not usually thought of as destinations for pilgrimage, but they often serve an important function for the pilgrim *malgré lui*, who travels an atypical path to salvation. From this moment, Gracie begins a long journey home to her mother and to Jesus— with several detours on the way, for, like most pilgrims, Gracie is not presented with a map, only with internal promptings characteristic of a pilgrim *malgré lui*.

Gracie knows she needs to go home to Scrabble Creek, though the first time she is there, she only visits with the Dutys, not trying to return to the cabin where her family had lived. On her way to Scrabble Creek, she is beginning to feel like some contact with the divine might be possible again: “The snowy slopes stretched right up unto the pale gray mist, so I couldn’t make any distinction between the earth and the sky. It looked like you could just walk up the mountain and into Heaven without any trouble” (252-53). And at this stage of her journey, she begins to trust that she will eventually find her way, even without a map. Ruth Duty expects her to have a plan: “What I want to know, Florida Grace,” she says, “is what you are planning to do now” (259). Gracie replies “I don’t know,” but then she proceeds to explain to the readers that this “was certainly true, although so far I had known enough to leave Randy Newhouse and come over here. I was
waiting to find out what I had to do next, but I was beginning to understand that there
was an order to everything, a pattern which would be vouchsafed to me in due time”
(259-60). Gracie’s pilgrimage follows a pattern, a sacred pattern not entirely of her own
design, but one in which she has the opportunity to participate, if she chooses.

At first, following Ruth Duty’s suggestion, Gracie believes that this pattern is
meant to lead her back “home” to Travis Word. When she travels to the Word farm,
however, and—thanks to her “gift of discernment”—discovers that Ruth was wrong, that
for her “there would be no going back” (262), she begins to contemplate going back to a
different kind of home, the home associated not with her ex-husband, but with her
mother. This return is not a conscious decision, but nevertheless one in which she has full
confidence: “Somehow I had a plan forming itself in my mind while I slept, so that I
awoke full of purpose, and knew what to do next” (263). Gracie buys supplies and holes
up in the cabin where her family had lived by Scrabble Creek. It has been uninhabited
ever since, and many of her mother’s clothes and possessions are still there. One
morning, a Sunday, while Gracie thinks of going to church, she hears her mother’s voice
loud and clear: “Come to me, Gracie, she says. Oh come to Jesus honey. It is time now, it
is never too late. Oh come to him it is time” (269).

In this call, coming home to her mother and coming home to Jesus are one and the
same. Gracie has associated Jesus with her father or with other figures who steal away
her mother’s attention, but here she sees Jesus and her mother together, as Mary and the
Christ child had called to her at Uncle Slidell’s putt-putt course. Her loyalty does not
have to be divided any longer. When Jesus calls through Gracie’s mother, she can’t resist:
she says, “I have always minded Mama” (269). As she sits by the stove, Gracie dozes off and then suddenly wakes: “It is time,” she says.

The Spirit comes down on me hard like a blow to the top of my head and runs all over my body like lightning. My fingers and toes are on fire. Oh Lord it is hard to breathe and I am scared Lord, I am so scared but I will let my hands do what they are drawing now to do and it does not hurt, it is a joy in the Lord as she said. It is a joy which spreads all through my body, all through this sinful old body of mine.

Now it is time to go.

Gracie, without consciously willing to do so, re-enacts her mother’s powerful religious experience, handling hot coals from the stove in spiritual ecstasy. Her mother’s religion is a belief expressed in physically grounded trust, and it reconnects Gracie with her own body, the body that she has viewed as leading her astray. According to Paula Gallant Eckard, the significance of this scene is that, “without question, the body and voice of the mother and the religion of the father have brought the daughter to salvation, wholeness, and a full acceptance of self” (190). Eckard correctly highlights the importance of the mother’s body and voice in Gracie’s transformation, but she fails to understand that the religious experience also comes from Gracie’s mother, not her father. The danger in associating the maternal with body and the paternal with religion is that this can lead to an essentialized view of religion and gender. In truth, Virgil Shepherd has a bodily experience of religion, too: handling snakes is hardly an abstract, rational practice. The difference is that Fannie’s handling of coals is primarily an expression of joy rather than a test of faith, and it occurs at home, embedded in the place Gracie loves. Far too often,
an essentialized view of gender and religion can characterize maternal spirituality as nothing more than “nurturing,” soft as opposed to harsh and doctrinal; however, handling hot coals is a bizarre activity that can’t be easily sentimentalized. The connection between the mother, the body, place, and the divine that occurs here is something powerful and unique, not something that can be reduced to stereotypes of “masculine” and “feminine” religion.

This time, when Gracie leaves Scrabble Creek—for, like Tarwater, the home place is the goal of her pilgrimage, but she must journey back out into the world again to discover the fruits of that pilgrimage—she does not freeze it into an immobile picture in her mind. When she looks back at the house, it appears small to her, though she had “once thought it so big and fine” (272). However, it has once again imparted to her a sense of who she is, in relation to her mother, in relation to God: “I know myself as the girl I was, who used to love stories so much. Well this is the story of light Mama, this is the story of snow” (272). Light and snow are always shifting, constantly on the move, and Gracie announces “I am really coming Jesus” (272), ready to come home to him now that she has found a home within herself. As Jacqueline Doyle points out, Gracie also gains confidence in voicing her story, the story she has been telling throughout the novel. Gracie’s “mother’s—and later her own—handling of burning coals releases new Pentecostal tongues. Gracie moves from unconsciously speaking in tongues in her dreams to consciously claiming her right to interpret and give shape to her own identity” (275). A pilgrim malgré lui cannot, by definition, classify her journey as a pilgrimage while she is on it. However, in retrospect, even if she has not been able to control every step of the journey, her travels have brought her to the place where she can narrate the story of her
own past. Gracie does not claim her story is finished (again, the novel’s title is “Saving Grace”), but she is ready to share it with others.

Donna Haraway has written that “Situated knowledges are about communities, not about isolated individuals. The only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular” (qtd. in Lake 196). Florida Grace Shepherd, unlike her father, knows the importance of being somewhere in particular, and she experiences God’s presence not wholly on her own, but as mediated by her mother. In her stories, O’Connor, too, emphasizes the spiritual importance of particular places and particular bodies. Katherine Hemple Prown has claimed of O’Connor that “[b]ecause she associated the female with the particular, the mundane, and the trivial, she refused to allow women characters, particularly those who were ladies, to represent the universal, the transcendent, or the spiritually profound” (qtd. in Lake 122). However, what Prown clearly misses here is that, to Christians who value the Incarnation of Christ, the particular, mundane, and trivial are precisely what do represent the universal, the transcendent, and the spiritually profound. O’Connor’s proud, individualistic characters—male and female—fail to recognize the importance of the particular, until they come face to face with a startling reminder of embodiment, often a reminder of bodily limitation. We do not see the full unfolding of O’Connor’s characters’ pilgrimages. Nor do we see where Gracie goes after leaving Scrabble Creek for the last time. But we know that they, finally fully inhabiting their bodies, will take their homes with them, and will recognize the ability of each particular place to be a home.

A pilgrimage with home as its destination challenges universalist, modernist ways of thinking about both home and spirituality. As David Brown writes in God and
Enchantment of Place, “Modernism by its very universalism fails to make us secure, at home in each of our own personal and individual contexts. Instead, it seems to demand conformity, whereas Betjeman recognized that it is precisely the familiarity of the ordinary and the idiosyncratic that can most easily speak of the security that comes from an all-encompassing divine presence” (327-28). Home, marked with the personality of her mother’s presence, becomes a sacred site of transformation for Gracie. Likewise, it is in the familiar spot of Tarwater’s upbringing that he hears the call confirming his role in the world. Home can only be granted such spiritual significance in a religion that values the mundane and the ordinary, which Christianity affirms when it emphasizes the incarnation of Christ, the divine entering into the commonplace.

Furthermore, Christ’s incarnation brought God to dwell among oppressed, marginal people. Flannery O’Connor asserted that the South had a unique religious climate in part because of Southerners’ (and here she probably meant white Southerners’) shared history of defeat. In “The Regional Writer,” she comments:

When Walker Percy won the National Book Award, newsmen asked him why there were so many good Southern writers and he said, ‘Because we lost the war.’ He didn’t mean by that simply that a lost war makes good subject matter, What he was saying was that we have had our Fall. We have gone into the modern world with an inburnt knowledge of human limitations and with a sense of mystery which could not have developed in our first state of innocence—as it has not sufficiently developed in the rest of our country. (MM 58-59)
She connects this sense of defeat with the Southerner’s bodily identification with Christ. In fact, this is the context of her famous statement that the South is “Christ-haunted.” When asked why Southerners write about “freaks” (which could refer to both the disabled and the eccentric in her stories), she replies that “[t]he Southerner . . . is very much afraid that he may have been formed in the image and likeness of God” and thus he still has a sense of what the “whole man” is. If read in isolation from O’Connor’s stories, this statement may seem to value “whole” bodies, with “freaks” appearing only as derivations from the norm. However, O’Connor’s fictional freaks are of course those who most often embody Christ, albeit in untraditional ways. Christ’s incarnation occurs most powerfully among oppressed or marginalized bodies. (Of course African American Southerners were the most oppressed group in Georgia, and O’Connor’s story “The Artificial Nigger” is singular within her oeuvre for locating the divine in the body of a maternal African American woman and in the statue of an African American—gestures that were no doubt meant as tributes to African Americans’ history of suffering, but which also reflect some of O’Connor’s racist stereotypes. However, O’Connor was more familiar with the marginalization of poor whites, and so she more typically located the sacred among them.) On September 13, 1960, she wrote to William Sessions that “the traditional Protestant bodies of the South are being replaced on the grass roots level by all sorts of strange sects that bear not much resemblance to traditional Protestantism—Jehovah’s Witnesses, snake-handlers, Free Thinking Christians, Independent Prophets, the swindlers, the mad, and sometimes the genuinely inspired.” Though she belonged to the Roman Catholic Church (which, in Georgia, is rare enough that it could be considered a marginal denomination regionally, though a powerful one globally), O’Connor believed
that God could truly be found among these apparently eccentric sects—more so than among the staid worshipers at mainstream Protestant churches. Similarly, Lee Smith does not discount the apparently bizarre practice of snake-handling; she even implies that the corrupt, hypocritical Virgil Shepherd does perform some real miracles, through the grace of God.

In the introduction to his book *Roadside Religion: In Search of the Sacred, the Strange, and the Substance of Faith*, Timothy K. Beal explains why he visited primarily marginal Christian sacred sites in the off-the-beaten-path South:

> it is precisely in their marginality that they open avenues for exploring themes and issues that are central to American religious life, such as pilgrimage, the nostalgia for lost origins, the desire to recreate sacred time and space, creativity as religious devotion, apocalypticism, spectacle, exile, and the relation between religious vision and social marginality. So “outsider religion” becomes a way of illuminating “insider religion.” (7)

Beal, who visits sites that range from Holy Land USA, which recreates the sacred geography of Israel and Palestine in the mountains of Virginia, to Golgotha Fun Park, a biblical putt-putt course in Kentucky, concludes that these quirky expressions of religious faith can be more powerful than institutionalized religious theme parks, because they are marked by the intersection of the sacred and the mundane, the sacred and the personal. This personal stamp does not, however, make the site inaccessible to others; Beal writes, “In these places I experienced a correlation between connectedness to the land, personal authenticity, and openness to others. The more the place was locally grounded, rooted in
its particular natural environment, the more uniquely personal it was, and the more hospitable it was to others. Hospitality is always local” (212).

Acknowledging the reality of embodiment means acknowledging indebtedness to place, as well. This does not mean viewing place as deterministic, however. Because of the South’s particular history—because of its defeat, the relative poverty of its inhabitants, and the religious orientations of those who settled there—its religious environment, at least for the past century, has been distinct from that of the North (though hardly uniform, as the example of the Catholic Flannery O’Connor illustrates). O’Connor’s prophets and Smith’s snake-handlers may now seem a vanishing breed. Some may say “good riddance,” but these figures have served to remind us how incarnate Christianity is expressed through the local, the place-grounded, the unique, the marginal. As a writer, O’Connor advised aspiring Catholic writers to draw their primary inspiration from their region, not from the abstract aspects of their religion. The religion, she trusted, would be embodied within the characters and the story, if the writer really took incarnation seriously. The failed Catholic novel, she writes, tried “to make a culture out of the Church, but this is always a mistake because the Church is not a culture” (MM 199). Rather, the Church must be embedded within a local culture, with different expression of the same faith in different locales. Again, the incarnation validates the particularity of place, and thus Christ is best represented through local particulars. However, O’Connor also cautions against a romanticized regionalism (like that of Sue Monk Kidd and Jan Karon, I would argue): “There is nothing worse than the writer who doesn’t use the gifts of the region, but wallows in them. Everything becomes so Southern that it’s sickening . . . The general gets lost in the particular instead of being shown
through it” (104). O’Connor and Smith avoid wallowing in the romanticization of place by focusing their stories on eccentrics who embody the best and the worst of a region. No one could mistake Tarwater or Virgil Shepherd for a literal representation of what religious life is like in the South. However, because they are figures at the margins, at the extremes, of Southern culture, they reflect back on that culture without idealizing it. To identify with these characters, readers have to step outside their comfort zones; rather than having the “charm” of the South brought to us on a nice little tray, we must venture out on our own pilgrimage, whether we intend to or not, to meet these eccentrics whose bodies, grounded in place, live Christ in new and challenging ways.
Chapter Five

Women’s Spiritual Geographies of the African Diaspora: Paule Marshall’s

*Praisesong for the Widow*

Thus far in my exploration of women’s narratives of religion and place, I have primarily dealt with writers who depict a true spiritual “home” as the nexus of the soul’s geography. H.D., of course, as an expatriate, was separated from her childhood home in Pennsylvania, but she nevertheless viewed it as the center of her psyche. I have argued that centering spiritual geography around a home-place does not necessarily lead to an essentialist notion of identity: in writing of home and religious heritage, the writers discussed in my project emphasize the importance of attachment to a place and community, rather than emphasizing “origins.” In this chapter, I turn to narratives in which pure “origins” are impossible to reach, in which diasporic subjects are cut off from the land and the religion of their ancestors in “Mother Africa.” Yet, in the diasporic spiritual geography of African American women writers, “home” is still a possibility when the subject grounds herself in both the “roots” and “routes” of the African diaspora.

Of course, any discussion of roots and routes is indebted to Paul Gilroy’s monumental 1993 work *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. For Gilroy, “roots” represent an “ethnically absolute” form of “cultural kinship,” based in a narrative of shared history and ancestors (and especially, I would add, a shared place of origin), whether or not this narrative is based in fact. “Routes,” which to him are a much more complex way of speaking of black identity, refer to cultural exchange and hybridity, which Gilroy symbolizes through both ships and music (jazz and blues). Gilroy’s critique
of roots-based black identity emerges out of his frustration with African American identity politics in the 1970s and 1980s, and he provides a needed balance to forms of racial identity that exclusively emphasize ancestral origins. However, I find that Gilroy pays insufficient attention to the gendered and the religious elements of diasporic experience. For example, in Gilroy’s analysis of Martin Delany’s novel *Blake*, he praises the protagonist’s “scepticism and strictly instrumental orientation towards religion” and argues that these attitudes are particularly “important because African-American religion is so often the central sign for the folk-cultural, narrowly ethnic definition of racial authenticity that is being challenged here in the name of rhizomorphic, routed, diaspora cultures” (*Black Atlantic* 28).

Gilroy’s argument here is puzzling. Of course, his praise of “routes” over “roots” is no surprise: *The Black Atlantic* challenges forms of Africentricity that sought to ground black identity in “origins,” particularly the original place of Africa. However, African American religion, especially African American Christianity, is hardly a celebration of origins or “roots.” After all, Christianity is not usually viewed as the original religion of African Americans’ long-ago, pre-slavery ancestors (although many of the earliest Christian communities were in Africa, and Western Christianity needs to acknowledge its debt to African Christians, both past and present). Considering Christianity as a potential part of black identity is, therefore, hardly a simple roots-oriented approach. Rather, the inclusion of Christianity as part of the experience of many, though not all, African Americans necessitates a complex mixture of roots and routes, one that does not naively embrace either approach, but rather holds them in tension.
Like Gilroy’s dismissal of the religious experience of African Americans, his pronounced lack of attention to black women’s experience of roots and routes reveals some of the ways in which his argument needs to be expanded and more fully explored. He does acknowledge that “gender is the modality in which race is lived” (85), but his concern is almost exclusively with the construction of black masculine identity (except for brief analyses of the Margaret Garner narrative and of Toni Morrison’s use of it in *Beloved*—and, even in these sections, he analyzes women’s identity only in comparison to men’s). Clearly, in 1993, questions over the applicability and usefulness of travel metaphors for women were already flying in the critical atmosphere. One might question, then, why gender plays such a small role in *The Black Atlantic*. The conversations between feminist theorists (particularly feminist geographers) suggest ways in which Gilroy’s idea of the Black Atlantic needs a deeper gendered component.

For example, take ships, which are Gilroy’s central metaphor, and which are usually given female names and referred to with feminine pronouns. Gilroy ignores the gender issues associated with ships, though he takes care to point out their multivalent associations for African Americans: they represent both the horrors of the middle passage and the opportunities of transatlantic exchange, as exemplified by Frederick Douglass’s encounters with sailors in Baltimore. For much of history, however, women have not had access to the second mode of travel; to the women of the Black Atlantic, ships may be a more one-sided metaphor, representing only hardship and coercion, seldom full.

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39 For example, take the following passage from Anna Julia Cooper’s *A Voice from the South*, a late 19th-century work by an African American woman: “I purposely forbear to mention instances of personal violence to colored women travelling in less civilized sections of our country, where women have been forcibly ejected from cars, thrown out of seats, their garments rudely torn, their person wantonly and cruelly injured. . . . There can be no true test of national courtesy without travel” (93-4).
citizenship in the wide world. This distinction between the two kinds of travel depends on the role of choice, an issue that continues to divide feminist mobility theorists as well. Gilroy’s emphasis on the possibility of agency (even for those who have not willingly undergone voyages) is a helpful addition to this conversation; however, both he and feminist mobility theorists could gain from acknowledging the agency and creativity of those who, by law or economics, have been forced to stay in one place.

We need a gendered spiritual geography of the African diaspora, because black women’s narratives of religion and place incorporate both roots and routes. In this chapter, I will explore the intertwining of roots and routes, as mediated by gender and religion in Paule Marshall’s 1983 novel *Praisesong for the Widow*.

**Mobility in the African Diaspora**

*Praisesong for the Widow* takes place in many different physical locales: though the main narrative traces a few days within sixty-four-year-old Avey Johnson’s travels in the Caribbean, Avey’s vivid memories take her from childhood summers in South Carolina to young married life in New York City to older adult life in the suburbs—not to mention the hints of Africa that some of these places contain. However, one central legend dominates the spiritual geography of Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow*: the legend of the singing Ibos. Avey Johnson’s Great-Aunt Cuney (one of the more maternal figures in the novel—Avey’s biological mother is seldom mentioned) tells her of how, after the Ibos had been captured and brought to the shores of South Carolina, the Africans had taken a look into the future and, deciding they wanted no part of it, had marched back across the ocean to Africa, singing all the way. They, in spite of having
been chained and transported against their will, are able to reclaim their authority over where they choose to go. Their mobility, both geographical and spiritual, stands in stark contrast to the social and economic injustice that traps Avey and her husband Jay/Jerome, as well as many other African Americans. As Eugenia DeLamotte explains, Avey’s memories of her life depict “contemporary African Americans’ ostensible mobility through labor in the American economic system as silencing African-American voices, masking African-American reality, and replacing meaningful journeys with empty, parodic journeys equivalent to stasis” (83-4). In spite of the geographical mobility characterizing the Great Migration, in which African Americans left the South for jobs in Northern cities, most African Americans’ economic status remained static. Jay/Jerome Johnson’s education profits him little, when potential employers in New York reject him on account of his skin color. Only by making himself a slave to the system, working three jobs and sacrificing his time with his family, can he advance—and, as Praisesong for the Widow clearly suggests, this kind of “mobility” brings spiritual entrapment rather than freedom.

For Avey Johnson, freedom from the racially unjust brand of capitalist striving comes through subverting the economics of geographical journeys. Avey abandons midway the Caribbean cruise she has already paid for, and for this “waste” she is scolded by Jerome Johnson’s ghost. DeLamotte suggests that Jerome’s anger that Avey has squandered money by deserting the cruise reveals one of the many ways in which her journey is being double-exposed on the

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40 Avey uses “Jay” to refer to her husband before he becomes obsessed with climbing the social ladder and setting himself apart from other African Americans. As his transformation occurs, Avey “gradually found herself referring to him as Jerome Johnson in her thoughts. She couldn’t account for the change in any conscious way” (Marshall 132).
Ibos’. The Ibos’ goal in walking away from their ship, back across the water, was to wind up, as Avey will in many senses, back where they started, thus squandering the money paid for the voyage that was intended to turn them into objects. (95)

Avey learns that physical mobility powered by money really gets her nowhere: when, at Grenada, she suddenly disembarks from the aptly named Bianca (white) Pride, she risks apparent waste and immobility, not having finished her planned journey. At first, she plans to return to her house in North White Plains (the house that Jerome had built as a symbol of their growing economic status, a house that serves a similar symbolic function to the Bianca Pride—in other words, by going from the Bianca Pride to North White Plains, Avey’s journey would have taken her nowhere spiritually because she remains trapped within white-dominated spheres). However, she misses her plane and remains stuck in Grenada. This apparent immobility leads Avey to trace both the routes and roots of her diasporic heritage. In short, money and travel are not always symbols of freedom—nor are they unequivocally symbols of entrapment, since both are necessary for Avey to arrive at the point where she is ready to begin real journeying.41

For black Americans, who bear the history of the forced exile of slavery and of restricted opportunity for travel during slavery and the Jim Crow years, metaphors of mobility may seem historically insensitive—as well as perhaps undesirable, because those who have been taken from home, and have had to create a new one, are less likely to undervalue belonging to a place and a community. Yet Gilroy’s critique of modern black

41 In spite of the novel’s critique of placing too much emphasis on money, Avey’s journey is of course bought and paid for with some of the late Jerome Johnson’s life-earnings (thus, his ghost feels angry over the “waste”). However, money is curiously de-emphasized—and almost rendered invisible—in Avey’s transactions in the Caribbean. We never see her pay for anything. This one fact may disguise Avey’s American-ness, but it also hides her position of privilege, privilege replicating that of the colonialist.
political culture is that it “has always been more interested in the relationship of identity to roots and rootedness than in seeing identity as a process of movement and mediation that is more appropriately approached via the homonym routes” (Gilroy 19). His statement is a valuable corrective to the romantic hope of tracing one’s identity to a true origin, unmarked by the passage of time and by the world’s power struggles. However, his rejection of rootedness also dismisses the particular historical perspectives of diasporic women, women who have exhibited powerful agency in forging community ties, in the midst of great suffering.

Feminist theorist Janet Wolff argues that “just as the practices and ideologies of actual travel operate to exclude or pathologize women, so the use of that vocabulary as metaphor necessarily produces androcentric tendencies in theory” (224). While insisting that free-wheeling movement remains an exclusive image inapplicable to most women, Wolff acknowledges that some women, in the past, have managed to travel – especially in colonial situations, in which their racial and economic privilege overrode their inferior status as women: “As women travellers frequently pointed to the continuities and similarities with earlier European male travellers, the supremacy of distinctions of race above those of sex allowed them to take little account of their one obvious difference from these forbears—the fact that they were female” (qtd. in Wolff 233). Thus, in a more complex way than Gilroy acknowledges, race and gender are interrelated in transcultural routes. This issue foregrounds the way in which some feminist mobility theorists have begun to question whether the traveler or the theoretical nomad, as opposed to the literal nomad or the refugee—or the slave—is a metaphor available only to those with privilege, those who have a home to renounce.
“Deterritorialization,” as Deleuze and Guattari termed their idealized geography of nonbelonging, has a number of causes, and it is a grave mistake to ignore the particular circumstances that distinguish one woman’s deterritorialization from another’s. For, as feminist geographer Caren Kaplan points out, “if I choose deterritorialization, I go into literary/linguistic exile with all my cultural baggage intact. If deterritorialization has chosen me—that is, if I have been cast out of my home or language without forethought or permission, then my point of view will be more complicated. Both positions are constructed by the world system but they are not equal” (“Deterritorializations” 191). In a similar vein, Janet Wolff suggests that “free and equal mobility is itself a deception, since we don’t all have the same access to the road” (235). By privileging metaphors of routes over roots, Gilroy and some feminist mobility theorists have limited their scope to those with easy access to the road—and have, in the process, ignored feminist geographies arising from historically oppressed African American women or from Third-World women. I do not wish to argue that African American women of the pre-Civil Rights era were completely barred from travel and from social mobility. There were certainly black women who managed to defy societal norms and achieve agency through mobility, and their achievements need to be noted and celebrated. My point is that even these women are not “rootless”; again, I turn to Janet Wolff, who argues that “destabilizing tactics originate too from a place—the margins, the edges, the less visible spaces” (235). In other words, roots and routes cannot be easily separated. Moreover, we gain a more complex notion of a person’s mobility when we keep in mind the particular circumstances that have formed her.
Gilroy, rather than tracing the interlacing of roots and routes, prefers to emphasize the under-acknowledged cultural agency demonstrated by pre-Civil Rights (male) African Americans; in doing so, however, he ignores roots-based forms of agency on the part of African American women during the same period. Determined to challenge the assumption that pre-Civil Rights African Americans lacked free mobility, Gilroy introduces the figure of the Pullman porter, a symbol who serves “to identify the folly of assigning uncoerced or recreational travel experiences only to whites while viewing black people’s experiences of displacement and relocation exclusively through the very different types of traveling undergone by refugees, migrants, and slaves” (Gilroy 133). This historical perspective is a valuable corrective, and it reminds us that agency and mobility are possible even under injustice. However, Gilroy’s Pullman porter is undeniably male. He does not propose any equivalent female figure from history, nor does he seek to rectify this balance when he discusses the routes-type circulation of jazz and blues by male musicians. Until The Black Atlantic’s last chapter, in which Toni Morrison plays a key role, not once does a woman’s name surface among the musicians and writers Gilroy notes for their exchange back and forth across the Atlantic. True, Du Bois, to whom Gilroy devotes a whole chapter, is significant—but what about Maya Angelou, who was also living in Ghana at the time of Du Bois’s death there, and who so movingly recounts (in her 1986 memoir All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes) her attempts—both failed and successful—to find community and fellowship as a black American in Africa? Angelou carries within herself all the rich—as well as bewildering—cultural mixing that Gilroy attributed to ships, those “modern machines that were themselves micro-systems of linguistic and political hybridity” (Gilroy 12). She
writes, “I knew that Africa had creolized me. I was neither meat nor fowl nor good red herring. My native sassiness which had brought me from under the heels of brutes, had been softened by contact with the respectfulness of Ghanaians, yet, unlike them I did not belong to a place from which I could not be dislodged” (Angelou 173-74). Angelou here reveals that hybridity, while as complex and life-giving as Gilroy claims, also can be accompanied by isolation and loss. She does not have a home to reject, even should she wish to do so. Any account of Black Atlantic routes must also include the loneliness and longing found on both sides of the ocean.

Gilroy’s Pullman porter is indeed an important figure, representing an African American who traveled because of his own choice of profession, yet whose opportunities were limited by his subordinate status, yet who was able to respond to the situation creatively as a full actor and participant. However, Gilroy surely could have attributed this kind of creative agency to women’s (and men’s) root-building, as well. Both roots and routes, men and women, African and American are important contributors to the ever-shifting community of the black Atlantic.

Gilroy, though not counting women in the more active forms of exchange—jazz, hip hop, sailors, ships, and Pullman porters—does accord them a position as memory-keepers and memory-transformers. Toni Morrison carries the lead in this role in Gilroy’s last chapter. Notably, Morrison herself states, “From a woman’s point of view, in terms of confronting the problems of where the world is now, black women had to deal with post-modern problems in the nineteenth century and earlier. These things had to be addressed by black people a long time ago: certain kinds of dissolution, the loss of and the need to reconstruct certain kinds of stability” (qtd. in Gilroy 221). That desire to
reconstruct stability—and the celebration of the creativity and endurance involved in such efforts—is the missing piece from Gilroy’s picture of the Black Atlantic. Moreover, he seems to associate memory, stability, women, and place together in one static whole, while his men exchange in vibrant cross-ocean exchange. Part of the problem is that Gilroy seems to believe that place itself is static, rather than an ever-changing construction. He writes, “It should be emphasised that ships were the living means by which the points within that Atlantic world were joined. They were mobile elements that stood for the shifting spaces in between the fixed places they connected” (16). In other words, the fixed, grounded points themselves do not, for Gilroy, represent sites of cultural change or exchange. Once again, in Gilroy’s schema, the dynamic nature of place is ignored in favor of a masculinist vision of static, feminized place. He repeats the gendered pattern of equating male with change and mobility and women with unchanging place. As Doreen Massey points out, typically “the characterization of place as home comes from those who have left . . . and this characterization is framed around those who—perforce—stayed behind; . . . often the former was male, setting out to discover and change the world, and the latter female, most particularly a mother, assigned the role of personifying a place which did not change” (166-7).

42 The notion of place as static has its roots in bourgeois capitalist notions of home. Simone de Beauvoir writes of how bourgeois domesticity allows for men to experience both change and continuity, while women exist literally as place-holders: “These two elements—maintenance and progression—are implied in any living activity, and for man marriage permits precisely a happy synthesis of the two. In his occupation and in his political life he encounters change and progress, he senses his extension through time and the universe; and when he is tired of such roaming, he gets himself a home, where his wife takes care of his furnishings and children and guards the things of the past that she keeps in store. But she has no other job than to maintain and provide for life in pure unvarying generality; she perpetuates the species without change, she ensures the even rhythm of the days and the continuity of the home, seeing to it that the doors are locked” (qtd. in Young 129).
In reality, because the “stability” of place must always be built to face changing situations, it is not static or monolithic, even for memory-keepers. Again, as Massey writes, “A large component of the identity of that place called home derived precisely from the fact that it had always in one way or another been open; constructed out of movement, communication, social relations which always stretched beyond it” (170-1). The roots of a homeplace can also be routes, and both feminist mobility theorists and diaspora studies could gain from incorporating those who work to create an ever-changing, ever-growing “home” for themselves and others.

Gilroy’s rejection of religion as a roots-based form of African diaspora identity also reflects his simplistic view of place. Religion, like home places, can be based in movement, communication, and social relations, rather than on static fundamentalism or nostalgia. Moreover, religion is a major feature of the African diaspora experience, in part because it is always necessarily a blend of roots and routes. Religious practices can be represented according to their origins or their pathways of exchange, depending on the purposes of the representer. Gilroy’s challenge to a “roots” version of African American religion may, of course, be partly due to his lack of affinity, as a British citizen, for forms of worship that have primarily developed in the United States. But he still has a point. African Americans or other blacks of the African diaspora who do not sing gospel music, who do not punctuate testimonies with “Amen,” may feel alienated by this representation of “traditional” African American Christian worship. Then again, because these worship forms provide a strong sense of identity—political, cultural, and individual, not to mention spiritual—to many African-Americans, completely denying their potential for cultural expression seems unwise. In the midst of this dilemma, Paule Marshall’s
Praisesong for the Widow provides no easy solutions, but the novel does raise different possibilities of how roots and routes may be incorporated together in African-American spiritual identity.

The Roots and Routes of Diasporic Place

After disembarking from the Bianca Pride, Avey Johnson finds herself in a hotel room in Grenada. Hotels, significantly, are transitional spaces, spaces providing a buffer zone between “home” and “away.” In this hotel room, Avey begins her real journey: overnight, she does battle with her memories of a life de-spiritualized by both injustice and material acquisitiveness. However, in the morning, she finds herself taking a small journey by foot across the beach, which in turn leads to her accepting Lebert Joseph’s offer to take her on the boat-voyage to the small out-island of Carriacou. Those born and raised on Carriacou make an annual pilgrimage back there from Grenada, and so it may accurately be claimed that their route takes them back to their roots. But this Carriacou “root” is a very particular one: Marshall does not claim that all African diaspora identity can be understood simply by taking a boat journey from the island where you live to the island where you were born. And yet, as the people of Carriacou dance out the dances of their “nations,” returning home to Carriacou also connects them in some ways to Africa. In some ways, I say, because their dances do not represent a naïve belief that they have recovered their true origins and thus their true identities.43 Rather, as Avey herself realizes, watching the dances:

43 As Jane Olmsted explains, “Critics of Marshall’s ‘connective’ politics have accused her of formulating a simplistic, arbitrary, or at the very least predictable and heavy-handed spiritual connection between Africa and the Americas (a connection others read as deep, complex, and subtle)” (Olmsted 249). My analysis of Praisesong for the Widow argues for the latter characterization.
It was the essence of something rather than the thing itself she was witnessing. Those present—the old ones—understood this. All that was left were a few names of what they called nations which they could no longer even pronounce properly, the fragments of a dozen or so songs, the shadowy forms of long-ago dances and rum kegs for drums. The bare bones. The burnt-out ends. And they clung to them with a tenacity she suddenly loved in them and longed for in herself. (240)

What they have of their African heritage is fragmented, perhaps not “authentic” in the narrow sense of the word, but these fragments are what mark their identity as diasporic. Africa as a pure, ancestral place is unreachable, but they have put down roots in the shifting, routed ground of the diasporic place.

Avey’s encounter with people who are rooted/routed in their diasporic identity also connects her to her nearer roots in Tatem, South Carolina, where, as a child, she would visit her great-aunt. It is to Tatem that her great-aunt Cuney begins summoning Avey, through a dream, when she is still on the cruise ship. During the course of the novel, Avey does not physically return to Tatem. However, certain people, objects, actions, and language powerfully call to mind memories of Tatem (as well as memories of Halsey Street in New York, where she and Jay spent the first happy years of their marriage, and of childhood boat trips up the Hudson River)—so powerfully that she is almost transported to these places from the past. First, hearing Patois “had fleetingly called to mind the way people spoke in Tatem long ago. There had been the same vivid, slightly atonal music underscoring the words. She had heard it and that night from out of nowhere her great-aunt had stood waiting in her sleep . . . The vaguely familiar sound of
the Patois might have resurrected Tatem and the old woman” (67). At first, this sound calls her back to a particular place. However, as Avey gathers a second time with those traveling to Carriacou, she recalls not only a place, but also the experience of anticipating a journey, a journey that begins to take on mystical overtones: “It didn’t seem that they were just going on a day’s outing up a river to a state park a few miles away, but on a voyage—a full-scale voyage—to someplace far more impressive. No one there could have said where this place was. No one could have called its name” (191). Here, those traveling up the Hudson and those traveling to Carriacou are linked by the diasporic experience of routes: travel becomes a central symbol of the displacement of diasporic peoples. Avey feels a connection to her fellow travelers—not just because their ancestors also came from Africa, but, even more importantly, because they have all been displaced from Africa. She experiences this connection in an embodied way:

As more people arrived to throng the area beside the river and cool morning air warmed to the greetings and talk, she would feel what seemed to be hundreds of slender threads streaming out from her navel and from the place where her heart was to enter those around her. And the threads went out not only to people she recognized from the neighborhood but to those she didn’t know as well, such as the roomers just up from the South and the small group of West Indians whose odd accent called to mind Gullah talk . . . . (190)

This kind of black diasporic identity is similar to a kind that Gilroy might embrace. It resembles the sort of community he sees in blues songs, which, according to him, exemplify
a condition in which the negative meanings given to the enforced movement of blacks are somehow transposed. What was initially felt to be a curse – the curse of homelessness or the curse of enforced exile – gets repossessed. . . . it also represents a response to the successive displacements, migrations, and journeys (forced and otherwise) which have come to constitute these black cultures’ special conditions of existence. (Gilroy 111)

In other words, displacement and a shared history of racial injustice create a kind of community that, to Gilroy, is more significant than a communal identity based in “Africa.”

However, Avey Johnson’s experience of growing diasporic consciousness ultimately goes deeper than Gilroy’s, because she deals more fully with the spiritual and the embodied (including gendered) elements of being diasporic. Significantly, her greatest transformation—a purging experience—occurs on the boat to Carriacou, a journey in which she recalls an Easter Sunday in her childhood church and in which she also re-members the Middle Passage.44 That these two aspects are combined and layered with the literal journey to Carriacou is surely no coincidence. Tracing religious routes, perhaps without any hope of finding one’s “original” religious roots, is a key component of diasporic experience. Any Christian of the African diaspora has to deal with the fact that slavery and conversion to Christianity were most likely linked in their ancestors’ experience. In her portrayal of Avey Johnson, Marshall does not reject Christianity as the

44 “Re-memory,” a term Toni Morrison uses in Beloved, “functions to re-collect, re-assemble, and organize [memories] into a meaningful sequential whole through . . . the process of narrativization” (Henderson 71). As one re-memories an event, one almost re-experiences it at the same time that one is constructing a narrative about it.
religion of the oppressors, nor does she take the accommodationist approach of giving thanks that she was taken from Africa so that she could be introduced to the Christian God. Instead, Marshall’s Avey Johnson experiences diasporic religion in more complex ways, mediated by maternal religious figures who exemplify both routes and roots.

The older women on the boat, Avey realizes with a “shock of recognition,” are amazingly like

the presiding mothers of Mount Olivet Baptist (her own mother’s church long ago)—the Mother Caldwell and Mother Powes and Mother Greens, all those whose great age and long service to the church had earned them a title even more distinguished than ‘sister’ and a place of honor in the pews up front. From there their powerful ‘Amens’ propelled the sermon forward each Sunday. Their arms reached out to steady those taken too violently with the spirit. And toward the end of the service when the call went out: ‘Come/Will you come . . .?’ and the sinners and backsliders made their shamefaced calvary up to the pulpit, it was their exhortations which helped to bring them through.

Here, the Christian women of the church are a supportive community, those who help to birth new souls, as the old Carriacou women will help Avey to be reborn. Avey’s memory of the church mothers’ role in the invitational part of the service hearkens back

45 For example, Phillis Wheatley’s late-18th-century poem “On Being Brought from Africa to America” begins with the lines, “‘Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land, / Taught my benighted soul to understand / That there’s a God, that there’s a Saviour too: / Once I redemption neither sought nor knew” (13).

46 Some critics find Avey’s apparent return to a childlike state troubling. Susan Rogers argues that “the novel’s portrayal of Avey’s emotional and physical rebirth . . . is disconcerting in terms of the suggestion that it is possible to return to an unmediated state of being, to a tabula rasa of mind and body” (77). While I can see Rogers’s point, I think she pays too little heed to the mediating influence of the maternal figures in the novel (the women on the boat to Carriacou, the church mothers, even Rosalie), who often appear in conjunction with Avey’s key bodily experiences.
to her dream of her Great-aunt Cuney in South Carolina: “she [Cuney] was pleading with her now to join her, silently exhorting her, transformed into a preacher in a Holiness church imploring the sinners and backsliders to come forward to the mercy seat. ‘Come/O will you come . . .?’ The trees in Shad Dawson’s wood gave voice to the old invitatinal hymn, speaking for her. ‘Come/won’t you come . . . ?’ (42). The unspecified place of Mount Olivet Baptist Church (presumably somewhere in New York City) and the place of Tatem, South Carolina—both of which represent Avey’s childhood spiritual “roots”—become conflated with her experience of a boat journey, a “route.”

Avey’s experiences of African American Christianity do not divorce her from her African past, but neither do they deny the intervening history of oppression and slavery. The “Ring Shout” that Avey witnesses as a child on Tatem is reminiscent of African dance traditions (and Avey later learns that her summers imitating the distinctive shuffle of the Ring Shout allows her to pick up the “Carriacou Tramp” almost immediately), but it has also been adapted to a Christian context and made representative of resistance to oppression: “Even when the Spirit took hold and their souls and writhing bodies seemed about to soar off into the night, their feet remained planted firm. I shall not be moved” (34). Though Aunt Cuney, as a young woman, experiences the prohibition on lifting feet too much from the ground as an unreasonable restriction, and it leads to her voluntary departure from the church, the shuffling style is embodied with a flexible, though no less significant, history of meaning. The Ring-Shouters may be cut off from the “original” intent of the Ring Shout, but they have made it their own, just as they have done with Christian traditions.
Significantly, the boat upon which Avey remembers Easter Sunday at Mount Olivet Baptist Church is named the *Emanuel C*. “Emanuel” means “God with us,” and it is a name most often referring to Jesus Christ, God in a human body. Avey’s own full name, “Avatara,” is related to “Emanuel”: an avatar is also the embodiment of a god. Avey’s experience of the bodily humiliation of extreme nausea and diarrhea on the *Emanuel C* is what leads to her rebirth, her increased sense of connection with her own body—and with both its placed and its displaced heritage. Like Jesus, however, Avey must undergo physical suffering before resurrection. That suffering is actually part of what links her not only to her body, but also to the suffering that underlies the routes of blacks in the New World: the *Middle Passage*. After she becomes sick and is placed in the deckhouse, Avey had the impression as her mind flickered on briefly of other bodies lying crowded with her in the hot, airless dark. A multitude it felt like lay packed around her in the filth and stench of themselves, just as she was. Their moans, rising and falling with each rise and plunge of the schooner, enlarged upon the one filling her head. Their suffering—the depth of it, the weight of it in the cramped space—made hers of no consequence.

(209)

Through her body, Avey gains a sense of her place in relation to the history of the African diaspora.

Avey’s healing process continues to be mediated through her body. After she lands on Carriacou, Lebert Joseph’s daughter Rosalie bathes her, in a scene also carrying associations with the Christian rite of baptism and with the “laying on of hands” (217), a
biblical practice regarding healing but one given particular emphasis in African American Christianity. Rosalie is herself described as “an idea given flesh,” a phrase reminding readers of the novel’s recurring images of incarnational spirituality. However, like many of the people Avey encounters on Grenada and Carriacou, Rosalie’s body also represents many “avatars,” or embodiments, of maternal solicitude: to Avey, half-conscious, Rosalie’s figure had been any number of different people over the course of the night: her mother holding in her hands a bottle of medicine and a spoon, the nurse in the hospital where she had had her children leaning over her spent body to announce that it was healthy and a girl: ‘a beautiful baby girl, Mother, and with so much hair!’; the figure had even grown to twice its height at one point to become her great-aunt beckoning to her in the dream. (217)

As in previous encounters, the conflation of disparate people within one body also leads to the association of many distinct places and times. Avey emerges from her bath feeling that the “island once again had solidity and form. Yet, with her mind continuing to swing like a pendulum gone amok from one end of her life to the other, she felt to be dwelling in any number of places at once and in a score of different time frames” (232). This confused mixture of times and places actually represents spiritual growth for Avey, for she is beginning to recognize how all these times and places have a home in her body.

Her bath also leads her to re-member her sexual pleasure from the early years of her marriage with Jay, and this period of her life becomes re-sacralized in her memory. Jay, before he had become jaded by the experience of the rat-race for economic success,
had viewed his wife’s body as a kind of sacred place: “He would lie within her like a man who has suddenly found himself inside a temple of some kind, and hangs back, overcome by the magnificence of the place” (127). He senses invisible presences like those of Erzulie, Yemoja, and Oya, “a pantheon of the most ancient [female, African] deities who had made their temple the tunneled darkness of his wife’s flesh” (127). This passage, though moving, is somewhat strange, because it shows more Africanist consciousness than either Jay or Avey usually display. Perhaps the intrusion of an apparently authorial consciousness here in fact suggests that Jay and Avey have access to a deeper unconscious knowledge through their bodies.

*Praisesong for the Widow*’s celebration of embodiment—especially embodiment in *place*—as necessary to healing the wounds of slavery resonates with a similar theme in Toni Morrison’s later novel *Beloved*. Baby Suggs, an “unchurched preacher,” delivers her messages most powerfully in the “Clearing,” a “wide-open place cut deep in the woods nobody knew for what at the end of a path known only to deer and whoever cleared the land in the first place” (Morrison 87). Because of its apparent uselessness, the Clearing has the power to subvert prevalent economies of worth. Here, Baby Suggs tells her assembled congregation of African American men, women, and children to love their own flesh, flesh that is unvalued and hated by whites. Slavery turned flesh into an economic commodity; post-slavery, this injustice continues. Sethe sells her body to pay for her child’s gravestone; in *Praisesong for the Widow*, Jerome Johnson’s economic assets are referred to as “the whole of his transubstantiated body and blood” (Marshall 88). As DeLamotte writes, “In this image of a man ‘transubstantiated’ into property, late twentieth-century capitalism performs the function of slavery” (96). The only way to
reverse the process is to celebrate the body for its own worth, to fully inhabit it as a sacred place, to be fully incarnate. Incarnation leads, in turn, to a resurrection of the spirit within the flesh: “Slavery, like crucifixion, attempts to reduce the spirit to flesh; incarnation (Emmanuel, ‘God with us’) is the spirit made flesh; resurrection is the triumph of the spirit in the flesh. . . .” (DeLamotte 96).

In his book *Faithful Vision: Treatments of the Sacred, Spiritual, and Supernatural in Twentieth-Century African American Fiction*, James W. Coleman argues that, through Baby Suggs’s sermons in the Clearing, *Beloved* “critiques the biblical by showing how her words and acts address the reality of historical black oppression better than those of Jesus” (86). Though Coleman has a valid point, he misses the significance of incarnation in Christian theology and practice—including Baby Suggs’s theology and practice. The fact that Jesus became incarnate in a particular body and culture gives value to all bodies as potential sites of divine activity. Because of that particularity, of course, Jesus’ words and acts have a certain cultural limitation that keeps them from being easily accessible to other cultures—this, again, is where the theology of incarnation becomes important, because Christians are called to continue embodying Christ in the particularity of their own cultures. This is precisely what Baby Suggs does. Rather than revising the Bible, she helps people to incarnate its message in the daily circumstances of their lives.

“Here,” says Baby Suggs, “in this here place [the Clearing], we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. . . . No, they don’t love your mouth. *You* got to love it. This is flesh I’m talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved” (Morrison 88). This is the message that Avey Johnson’s years of experience, reinterpreted in the light of
her journey to Grenada and Carriacou, teach her. Like Baby Suggs, Avey Johnson determines to pass on this message. To be true to embodied diasporic experience, she must also describe the feelings of mind-and-body separation that often accompanied African Americans’ experiences of suffering and slavery. As Barbara Christian argues, this separation functioned in the past “not as fragmentation but as a source of wisdom, stemming from a history of the forced displacement of blacks in the West” (Christian 150)—in other words, a survival tactic. Avey preserves the memory of this mind-body segregation when she plans to tell her listeners of her ancestor Avatara’s words: “Her body she always usta say might be in Tatem but her mind, her mind was long gone with the Ibos . . .” (254-55). Avey’s own path is different, however, for rather than separating the locations of her mind and body, she learns to ground herself firmly in diasporic places like the Halsey Street apartment and Ibo Landing in Tatem, South Carolina.

Even before she leaves the cruise ship, Avey begins to recall the floor on which she and Jay danced together when they lived in poverty on Halsey Street: “And the hardwood floor which Jay had rescued from layers of oxblood-colored paint when they first moved in and stained earth brown, the floor reverberating with ‘Cottontail’ and ‘Lester Leaps In’ would be like a rich nurturing ground to which she could always turn for sustenance” (12). “Avey Johnson hadn’t thought of that floor in decades” (12), we learn, and we know that a significant process is beginning. In fact, it is to memories of this floor, this “rich nurturing ground,” that Avey returns after her journey to Carriacou. She knows that, like Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, she will tell her story to people she meets, including the hotel desk clerk in Grenada. It is a story specifically about place, “about the living room floor in Halsey Street: of how when she would put on the records
after coming in from work, the hardwood floor, reverberating with the music, used to feel like rich and solid ground under her. She had felt centered and sustained then, she would tell him, restored to her proper axis” (254). The floor of the apartment on Halsey Street, then, along with the Landing at Tatem, are her roots, though she may also be connected to Africa by routes.

In fact, the Halsey street rituals between Jay and Avey do also link them to each other by linking them to their shared heritage of the African diaspora:

Moreover (and she only sensed this in the dimmest way), something in those small rites, an ethos they held in common, had reached back beyond her life and beyond Jay’s to join them to the vast unknown lineage that had made their being possible. And this link, these connections, heard in the music and in the praisesongs of a Sunday: ‘. . . I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were/young . . .,’ had both protected them and put them in possession of a kind of power . . . . (137)

This is not a pure “return” to African roots, however, because these links to the past are mediated through their Christian heritage. They hear these connections in the “praisesongs of a Sunday,” and even their “secular” music’s importance is expressed in terms borrowed from Christian tradition, a tradition that is also their own. For Avey, in Jay’s “hands the worn-out album with its many leaves became a sacred object, and each record inside an icon” (94). Icons are not a stereotypical part of African American Christianity, but the reference to them shows that, while Avey and Jay celebrate the particulars of African American Protestant Christianity, their rituals also bear the stamp of older Christian traditions and of older, non-Christian African religious traditions.
Neither “root” has to be subsumed by the other. Instead, both of these heritages are expressed in the particularity of one couple’s simultaneously sacred and profane rituals. Unlike Paul Gilroy, who claims that “vernacular”/“profane” forms of black music are “especially valuable because they have supplied a means to think black sociality outside of patterns derived from either family- or church-based forms of kinship and community” (202), Marshall represents African American music, both sacred and secular, as capable of sustaining particular community through (though not exclusively because of) the vehicle of religious and ethnic tradition. The apartment on Halsey Street is transformed into a diasporic sacred place because of their ritualistic acts.

Avey’s experience of diasporic place on Carriacou leads her to realize that Tatem, too, is a diasporic place, and she resolves to rebuild her great-aunt’s house there and to take her grandchildren and other young people to the Landing, to teach them about their roots in routes. Great-Aunt Cuney taught Avey the significance of the Landing as the place where a shipload of captured Ibos were brought, destined for slavery. In the miraculous story that Great-Aunt Cuney heard from her own grandmother (the original Avatara, for whom Avey is named), the Ibos simply took off, walking across the water back to their home in Africa. Such a return is possible for them, and Cuney’s grandmother is historically close enough to them that she longs to make the same return spiritually: “Her body she always usta say might be in Tatem but her mind, her mind was long gone with the Ibos . . .” (254-5). Even a spiritual return to Africa is not necessary or desirable for Avey, however. Instead, she is led to claim the diasporic place of Tatem as her home.
“A Place They Cannot Forget but Can Barely Endure to Remember”47: Southern Roots and Routes

Avey’s diasporic spiritual geography is particularly significant because it involves both northern and southern locations in the U.S., as well as the Caribbean, thus implying that these rooted sites are connected through routes. The inclusion of the U.S. South in Avey’s spiritual geography reminds readers that going “home” is not always a nostalgic wish-fulfillment, for the South has a conflicted place in African American spiritual geography, as many contemporary novels reveal. The South is “‘down home’” (Bone xxii) to many Blacks not born there; a “homeplace” for people whose fathers and mothers left decades ago’ (Holt 137-138). It is this mecca, so to speak, toward which many African American writers turn in their search for a site that represents a home base for certain characters seeking grounding and stability” (Fultz 79). However, the South also is the site of slavery, of the most egregious segregation and other forms of racial injustice. Rather than excising the South from their spiritual geographies, many characters in recent African American fiction, particularly in the fiction of Toni Morrison, must first travel South, tracing the routes of their ancestors. Philip Page further explains this pattern in Morrison’s fiction: “as characters in the urban North struggle to create healthy identities, they must come to terms with their own or their ancestors’ rural southern pasts by somehow fusing past and present” (29).

Milkman Dead makes such a journey in Morrison’s Song of Solomon (1977); so too do the young professional woman Cocoa Day in Gloria Naylor’s novel Mama Day

47 This phrase comes from Toni Morrison’s Beloved. It refers to “Sweet Home,” the Kentucky plantation whose name is meant to be taken both ironically and sincerely. Though it was a slave plantation and contains awful memories for Sethe and Paul D, it was also a kind of home for them, especially for Sethe, because of her memories of her years there with her husband Halle.
(1988) and the teenage character Yolanda in Regina Taylor’s play *Crowns* (2003).

Though questions of masculine identity are prominent in Milkman’s journey, these three protagonists share the experience of spiritual healing through a return to family roots in the South. Paul Gilroy would no doubt be suspicious of this trope, labeling it an “authoritarian” or “essentialist” notion of black identity, as when he writes, “The appeal to family should be understood as both the symptom and the signature of a neo-nationalist outlook that is best understood as a flexible essentialism.” He further claims a relationship between the “ideal, imaginary, and pastoral black family” and “authoritarian representations of blackness” (99). However, the return to the South in these works by contemporary African American women writers is no mere utopian fantasy, nor an attempt to impose a single notion of what it means to be black. Rather, treading through slavery’s geography serves to address another critique Gilroy has of roots-oriented black identity: the tendency to skip over slavery in the attempt to recall the greatness of African tradition. Gilroy claims:

> Blacks are urged, if not to forget the slave experience which appears as an aberration from the story of greatness told in African history, then to replace it at the centre of our thinking with a mystical and ruthlessly positive notion of Africa that is indifferent to intraracial variation and is frozen at the point where blacks boarded the ships that would carry them into the woes and horrors of the middle passage. (189)

This is certainly not the approach of Marshall, Morrison, Naylor, or Taylor, all of whom place a confrontation with the Southern history of slavery at the center of a protagonist’s healing journey.
Gilroy may see the U.S. South as a constraining force too powerful in defining black identity, but what he calls “an ethnically absolute and racially homogenous culture” is no such thing. In fact, it is fallacious to speak of a single African American South, as physical geography often affected practices of slavery (though by no means lessening its injustice). For example, the Sea Islands cultures that are so important in Marshall’s and Naylor’s texts are distinct from other African American cultures because, in part, of their separation from the mainland:

Many scholars believe that because of the isolation of the island [St. Helena Island, South Carolina] and the marshy land . . . the majority of the African bondsmen were able to maintain many of their African customs. In addition, there was not always a large population of whites living on the island because the conditions of the area bred mosquitoes and disease that the whites could not tolerate. These conditions caused many whites to serve as absentee owners, and in many instances blacks were left to serve as overseers. (Thaxton 230)

Geography has caused the Sea Islands (or Gullah) culture to have distinct features setting it apart from other cultures in the African American South. The Sea Islanders’ relative freedom from white interference also allowed them to fuse Christian belief with African-diaspora cultural practices in a unique combination. According to Margaret Washington Creel, “For many years, Gullahs heard of ‘Christianity’ mainly from black rather than white teachers, and this contributed to the persistence of African norms, thought, and ceremony” (231).
One of these ceremonies representing a unique, geography-influenced blend of Christianity and African-derived custom is the ring shout, featured both in Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow* and in Taylor’s *Crowns*. *Crowns*, which depicts the initially reluctant journey of a New York teen named Yolanda to her grandmother’s home in Darlington, South Carolina, is structured around Christian ritual, as well as around times of day corresponding to each ritual: a procession into a Sunday service during the morning, a wedding in the afternoon, a funeral in the evening, followed by a baptism and rebirth. This organization suggests that there is an easy connection, at least in this particular community, between the cycles of nature and the rituals of church. Moreover, the church rituals, songs, and especially dances contain hints of older African ceremonies. A hymn at the end of the “Morning Service” flows into a dance that becomes a “ringshout” from the days of slavery, which in turn becomes a dance accompanied by “African cowbells and shouts and prayers spoken in tongues of the Ivory Coast of Africa” (*Crowns* 24). Again, such resonances are not a simplistic return to pure roots, because they are presented as fragmented, distorted by a gap of centuries and of miles. Though Yolanda joins the ring shout, it does not bring instant healing. She soon finds herself breaking away in agony, shouting the question, “Can this dead soul live again?” It is too soon in her journey, and Africa is too distant to revive her—at least without the mediation of the African-American church women. Yolanda needs community, and the Holy Spirit (or the “spirit” of Africa—it is left unclear exactly which of these two spirits Taylor has in mind) needs hands and feet and strong voices to speak to her. Like Avey Johnson’s, Yolanda’s rebirth experience must come through an embodied, emplaced spiritual community—but also a community with ties to another place and culture.
The fluidity of this one dance scene in *Crowns* represents a flexibility that Gilroy refuses to attribute to roots. However, he is willing to claim that black music, particularly the blues, represents “a changing rather than an unchanging same” (101). If he had read Naylor’s *Mama Day*, he might have acknowledged that, for many African American women writers, home and “roots” are also a changing rather than an unchanging same. “Home,” says Cocoa in *Mama Day*. “It’s being new and old all rolled into one” (49).

Being home does not mean accepting one single, monolithic definition of racial identity, nor one single path of tradition.

African American women’s narratives of spiritual geography significantly complicate our notion of “home.” For diasporic peoples, home can be both the place from which they came and their current location; home can also be a concept representing their hopes for the future. “Home” can represent all these things in alternation or simultaneously; thus, it is possible to share Eduardo Galeano’s sentiment, “*Tengo nostalgia de un país que no existe todavía en el mapa*” [“I have nostalgia for a country that doesn’t yet exist on the map”] (qtd. in McClennen 243). When Paul Gilroy rejects the notion of “stable” home in favor of “mobile” ships, he loses sight of the transformative potential of home itself. Homes are not exclusively places of origin; they are also places of arrival, places of existing on the border between past and present (and even sometimes the future). An appreciation of or longing for home does not necessarily indicate a simplistic or essentialist notion of origin-based ethnic identity. Iris Marion Young writes, “Home as the materialization of identity does not fix identity, but anchors it in physical being that makes a continuity between past and present” (Young 132). That physical being, for Paule Marshall and the other African American women writers I have
referenced in this chapter, lies in the complex ground of diasporic space. Diasporic space can be in physical locations from New York to South Carolina to Grenada; its distinguishing feature is that it combines roots and routes, body and spirit, into one inseparable whole.

Even as a child, Avey Johnson understands that her boat rides up the Hudson River are mysterious journeys combining routes and roots. Their destination is not just the state park, but also some mysterious territory they cannot name. “And they weren’t just going to this place, wherever it was, whatever its name just to loll on the grass and eat fried chicken and potato salad and to nap or play bid whist during the afternoon heat. But to lay claim: ‘We gon’ put on our robes and shout all over God’s heaven!’” (Marshall 192, italics mine). In spite of the mysterious quality of diasporic place, Avey and her fellow travelers can lay claim to it—and simultaneously make a claim on heaven, too. This is no simplistic vision of the role of religion and place in diasporic identity. For contemporary African American women writers, the spiritual geography of diasporic place is as complex as it is fruitful.
Chapter Six

“It Comforts Me So Deeply That It’s Unsettling”: Gender and the Spiritual Geography of the Cloister

In Willa Cather’s 1931 novel *Shadows on the Rock*, the Canadian trapper Pierre Charron is stupefied and angered when Jeanne Le Ber rejects him for a cloistered life devoted to Christ. Even after she retreats into solitary contemplation, he can’t take no for an answer: twice he invades her space, prompted by the desire to see whether she has changed her mind (the first time) or her appearance (the second). “I can never get the recluse out of my mind,” he complains (Cather, SR 146). Charron’s fascination with cloistered, secluded women seems to have filtered down to lower regions of North America by the nineteenth century. In both fiction and reality, antebellum Protestants delighted in macabre fantasies of what really went on behind convent walls, culminating in the burning of an Ursuline convent in Boston in 1834, and the subsequent publication of two convent “tell-all” narratives: Rebecca Reed’s *Six Months in a Convent* (1835) and Maria Monk’s *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery* (1836). While American Protestants speculated about the nuns, English diarist Frederick Maryat speculated about the Americans, particularly about how the convent burning could occur in “a country where all forms of religion are tolerated” (qtd. in Franchot 137). The most convincing explanation for him? “The majority of the mob were influenced more by curiosity than any other feeling. The Convent was sealed to them, and they were determined to know what was in it” (qtd. in Franchot 137).
Since about 1990, American presses have once again been flooded with books about convents, monasteries, and what goes on inside them. Through both fiction and memoir, contemporary women writers have ventured imaginatively – and in person – into gender-specific sacred spaces, into the cloister. Is this contemporary move simply more of the same semi-voyeuristic urge that drove Pierre Charron and nineteenth-century anti-Catholics? Or is it an attempt to retreat from the gaze of men, to find oneself more authentically in a spiritual community that values solitude? Or is it a blind, misguided grasping at comfortable walls that will only close in on the self and exclude others?

The cloister carries with it histories of both repression and liberation, and this paradox itself draws spiritual seekers. Esther de Waal explains the centrality of paradox in Benedictine monasticism thus: “This polarity, this holding together of opposites, this living with contradictions, presents us not with a closed system but with a series of open doors. . . . We find that we have to make room for divergent forces within us, and that there is not necessarily any resolution of the tension between them” (22-3).

Contemporary American women writers such as Louise Erdrich, Patricia Hampl, Toni Morrison, Kathleen Norris, and Kristin Ohlson are challenging the cloister’s boundaries and finding that, in turn, the space of the cloister challenges the boundaries of the self. In their writings, the cloister appears as a space to observe or a space to be excluded from, a space to travel to or a space to carry with one, and a space that spurs one on to growth even as it roots one. Kristin Ohlson perfectly sums up the paradoxical nature of these contemplative monastic spaces when she writes of their presence in the world, “It comforts me so deeply that it’s unsettling” (196). And, indeed, those who explore the cloister in its contemporary literary manifestations will be both comforted and unsettled.
Watching Weird Women Behind Walls

For Jeanne Le Ber, as well as for many women who have taken religious vows over the centuries, part of the appeal of monastic sacred space is its seclusion – or its exclusion of men, not only of men as sexual predators, but as family authorities as well. Ohlson explains that “becoming a nun set women apart from the world of men and even that of ordinary child-rearing, button-sewing, meatloaf-cooking women: they became almost another order of being. It was also a way for an ordinary girl to get out in the world, away from the old neighborhoods and their humble roots, and have some authority in schools and hospitals and missions far from home” (128). The Pope does, of course, have ultimate authority over all orders of nuns, but he exercises the same power over monks. Though the nuns’ rituals symbolizing their role as brides of Christ were once incredibly elaborate, they have greatly simplified in the years following Vatican II. Today both monks and nuns wear rings symbolizing their commitment to Christ and to his community, the Church. Even before such symbolic equalization took place, nuns’ relative freedom from male authority was a concern to many, including the Boston rioters who burned the Ursuline convent. Accounts of the rioters’ trial emphasize troubling traits of the Mother Superior: “She was a woman of masculine appearance and character, high-tempered, resolute, defiant, with stubborn, imperious will” (qtd. in Franchot 144). While these might be excellent traits in a Patrick Henry, they were panic-inspiring in a woman responsible for the education of not only Boston’s Catholic girls, but many of the upper- and upper-middle-class Protestant ones as well. As Jenny Franchot interprets the (male) community’s fears, “The rule of enclosure symbolized an imprisonment that ambiguously
contained female escape. Cloistered women, then, were captives in need of rescue but also, as the interrogation of the mother superior makes clear, cultural deviants in need of control” (qtd. in Franchot 144).

The suspicion of deviancy among apparently self-reliant women continues today, as Kristin Ohlson’s conversations with male colleagues about her writing project featuring nuns (Stalking the Divine) reveals. After telling her friends about the Poor Clares of the Perpetual Adoration, a completely cloistered group in a nearby Cleveland monastery, Ohlson reports, “Most men who weren’t at least medium-core Catholics looked alarmed. They always asked about the sex: at first they looked disturbed, as if they couldn’t countenance women who made do without the pleasures of men, then they perked right up again as they speculated about whether the nuns were pleasing each other. I got so tired of hearing this question that it started to make me twitch” (122).

While nuns with lesbian inclinations no doubt do exist, the men with whom Ohlson converses are less interested in these women’s sexual orientations than they are with the fact that they must have something to substitute for the absence of men. If this something is sexual rather than religious, it is less of a threat because then the nuns’ self-sufficiency is a “disease” that only lesbian women will catch. If religious fulfillment is the substitution, what’s to keep any woman – since women are supposedly more spiritual, anyway, according to a lingering form of nineteenth-century gender ideology – from being drawn away by this threat to male authority?

This is indeed the fear of the townsmen of Ruby in Toni Morrison’s 1998 novel Paradise. They too convince themselves that a group of women living together out on their own must be centered around deviant sexual practices. The Convent,
townspeople of Ruby call the women’s dwelling, was once a school run by nuns for Native American girls. The mission is rather unsuccessful, Catholics in Oklahoma being “as rare as fish pockets” (Morrison 227). Soon only the ancient Mother Superior remains, tended by one other nun and Connie (Consolata), whom she picked up from the street as a little girl in Brazil. During the inevitable legal tangles that arise as the mission begins to fold, the issue of the nuns’ tax-exempt status draws attention: “the real question for the assessor was why in a Protestant state a bevy of strange Catholic women with no male mission to control them was entitled to special treatment” (Morrison 232-3). Clearly, even in the eyes of the allegedly religion-neutral government, a group of independent women is suspect. The last nun eventually leaves and the Mother Superior dies soon after Mavis, the first of a series of wanderers, arrives at the Convent. Connie and the four wanderers – Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, and Pallas, none of them celibate or religious in a traditional sense – are the “Convent women,” and their self-sufficiency, their freedom from even the need to lay official claim to their property, sets the Ruby men on edge and challenges their patriarchal domesticity: “Out here in wide-open space tucked away in a mansion – no one to bother or insult them – they managed to call into question the value of almost every woman he knew” (Morrison 8) – women who keep house and bear children to continue the “8-rock,” pure black blood. The problem, for the Ruby men, is that the Convent space is both “tucked away” and in “wide-open space.” The men have constructed their lives and the lives of their families around the opposition of indoors (inside the patriarchal home) and “Out There.” Because of white violence during the Reconstruction Era, being Out There puts one’s life in danger: “space, once beckoning and free, became unmonitored and seething; became a void where random and organized
evil erupted when and where it chose – behind and standing tree, behind the door of any house, humble or grand. Out There where your children were sport, your women quarry, and where your very person could be annulled” (Morrison 16). Against this very real threat, however, the black men of Ruby have created their own form of oppression, governed by their fear of anything outside their control. And the Convent women are clearly outside their control.

For one thing, they come and go from the Convent as they please, some leaving for months at a time to visit relatives. The Convent door itself symbolizes this freedom, for it is never locked. The women, most of whom have had painful experiences associated with normative domesticity, embrace the Convent because they are not forced to stay there: “in no time at all they came to see that they could not leave the one place they were free to leave” (Morrison 262). In contrast, Steward, one of Ruby’s founders, is insistent about locking the doors of their homes, a fact that makes his wife Dovey furious (Morrison 90). And it is Steward who, in the raid on the Convent, “shoots open a door that has never been locked” (Morrison 262). Open doors imply acceptance of those who are not blood relatives, suggest networks of affection and domestic life not based in genealogy. The women’s independence from biological reproduction (though Pallas has a healthy baby at the time of the raid, the baby is born out of wedlock and thus outside the Ruby men’s ideals of passing down “family” heritage) is perhaps what leads the Ruby men to speculate (falsely) that they have performed abortions and sacrificed babies in rituals. And again, the Ruby men must place the Convent women in the category of sexual deviants in order to keep their influence from spreading to “normal” women, their own wives. “I caught them kissing on each other in the back of that ratty Cadillac,” and
“Lord, I hate a nasty woman” (Morrison 275) are their claimed reasons for their fear and hatred, but they get to the meat of the matter when they complain, “They don’t need men and they don’t need God. . . . and the mess is seeping back into our homes, our families” (Morrison 276). The women’s self-sufficiency, domestic and religious, is the reason that the men feel the need to invade the Convent and root out its inhabitants. The men perceive their horror in a spatial manner, as physically emanating from the building of the Convent. Many years before, Deek had had a sexual liaison with Connie, but they always met Out There in the woods: it is when she invites him for a rendezvous in the cellar of the Convent that he completely ends their visits. He seems to fear that the space (or Connie herself) will somehow devour him. But this feeling of fearful loathing, which all the men seem to share, also has an element of voyeuristic fascination about it. As they search the building for the women, they realize that “[t]hey have never been this deep in the Convent. . . . And at last they will see the cellar and expose its filth to the light that is soon to scour the Oklahoma sky” (Morrison 3). Exposure of women in a convent (whether a formal one or not) is seen as the only way to quench their power, which, paradoxically, radiates out from the mysterious hiddenness of their space.

So when a woman like Kristin Ohlson publishes a book about a community of nuns, is she exposing the cloistered women in the same way (minus the bloodshed) that the Ruby men expose the Convent women? Especially when she writes about a completely cloistered\(^{48}\) community, under the papal rule of enclosure, like that of the

\(^{48}\) The word “cloister” refers to a part of many monasteries and convents: a partially covered walkway, often along a courtyard. It is also frequently used, as I do within this paper, in a kind of synecdoche, standing in for the monastery as a whole. The adjective “cloistered,” however, when used in this specific religious context, refers to monastics under the papal rule of enclosure, who do not leave their monastery except for special occasions (such as doctors’ appointments), and have a limited number of visitors per month, whom they meet in a room with a grated wall between them and the visitor.
Poor Clares? Ohlson’s very title, *Stalking the Divine*, suggests a prurient sort of interest in these women’s lives, as does her language on the acknowledgments page, where she writes, “Many thanks to the Poor Clares of the Perpetual Adoration for allowing me to *peer* into their lives and *use* their experience to try to grasp this slippery matter of faith” (Ohlson vii, my italics). As I read it, Ohlson’s word choice reflects her own self-conscious discomfort with her own role as observer of the sacredly hidden. Ohlson never obtains access to the Poor Clares’ dwelling (except for the one occasion when she is accompanied by a photographer) – she must instead interview the nuns one by one in their parlor, with a grating separating them – but she is aware that even these conversations place her on more intimate footing with the nuns than even the average Catholic layperson. Ohlson admits, “I knew that a yearning for faith was only part of what tugged me toward the shrine. I was also drawn by plain nosiness combined with the notion that I might wreak a salable book from my visits, plus the pleasure of talking with these mysterious women when most other people couldn’t” (139). Part of the appeal is that of being admitted to the “in” clique, of exclusivity. Yet Ohlson also recognizes that, by even the small degree to which she penetrates that circle, she may be threatening the healthy and necessary boundaries set by the community. After she publishes her first article about the Poor Clares and St. Paul Shrine, the attendance at mass, the only occasion when the nuns may be publically – and then only partially – seen, nearly doubles. Ohlson, always the observer, watches the crowds watching the Poor Clares, “tilting their heads to get a good angle on the nuns’ enclosure” (Ohlson 90). Her publication has brought the nuns significant attention, a change which Ohlson initially views as positive, hoping that it will bring new recruits to the aging monastic community.
However, as she reflects on her own role in bringing the nuns into the public gaze, she begins to doubt that its effects will be entirely for the best:

I had started thinking that the Poor Clares were like one of those tribes that explorers discover in remote jungles, living in perfect harmony with their land and gods, but I knew that such stories often ended with disaster: ruinous publicity and exploiters often followed the explorers. I wondered if the guardian at the gate – the parishioner who wanted to turn me away when I was writing my article – had been right. Would I be the one to ruin the Poor Clares’ splendid secrecy? (Ohlson 56)

The nuns’ willingness to allow the photographer into the monastery indicates that they, too, feel that publicity is not wholly without benefit to them.\(^{49}\) However, Ohlson’s fears are proved right in part when, following the publication of the article, a solicitor takes advantage of the nuns’ relative ignorance of technology and sells them a web site at an inflated price. Part of the danger here is the nuns’ willingness to expose themselves, to use publicity to boost their shrinking numbers – yet this is a willingness that we would not criticize in a secular social movement, at least not if the publicity is merely accepted rather than actively sought. Perhaps Ohlson’s unease and the Poor Clares’ dilemma over publicity is yet another manifestation of the tension between seclusion and hospitality, a tension that, according to Esther de Waal, marks monastic life and spirituality (de Waal 82).

These tensions also surface within Louise Erdrich’s fictional Sacred Heart Convent, located in an Ojibwa reservation in North Dakota. Eleanor Mauser, Louise

\(^{49}\) As Ohlson rather cheekily phrases it, “I didn’t know that the rules of papal enclosure, which dictate the many ways in which the Poor Clares must separate themselves from the rest of the world, had a special loophole for newspaper photographers” (51).
Erdrich’s creation for her 1996 novel *Tales of Burning Love*, is an academic writing about Sister Leopolda (a.k.a. Pauline Puyat of *Tracks*), one of the convent’s nuns. Eleanor flees to Leopolda’s convent when a messy scandal erupts following her seduction of one of her students. While Eleanor’s ostensible purpose is to study her subject in person, she is also clearly motivated by the desire to escape her recent embarrassment, as well as by money problems and by sheer loneliness (*TBL* 38). Sacred Heart Convent provides Eleanor refuge. She prolongs her stay past the point where her apparent at-homeness is “something of an annoyance to the sisters, but in addition to their vow of hospitality they were also curious about Eleanor’s explanations and proud to think that they harbored a subject worthy of her study” (*TBL* 44). Though Eleanor is an annoyance and at least neurotic, if not worse, the nuns recognize that her stay, and the publication resulting from it, might win them respect in the outer world. Ironically, the convent arrives at this dilemma of hospitality only because, many years earlier, they admitted another social undesirable: Pauline Puyat, who was even more annoying to her fellow Sisters than Eleanor is, but who nevertheless was accepted into the community – though at a cost to her and to others.

At the very least, Leopolda/Pauline’s supposedly mystic fits – and her fame itself – create an extra burden of housework for the other nuns. After Pauline’s breakdown and subsequent veneration by local Catholics,

Sister Hildegarde fumed, threw up her hands. Who, did those people outside think, who took care of these holy martyrs, these self-indulgent saints? . . . Linens must be bleached, scrubbed, hung on lines to fry, ironed smooth. They must be folded and set into the closets. Soon,
removed from their shelves, the sheets would return to be stained, discarded, and go through the same tedious process. . . . Buckets, mops, a constant correction of the floors, the state of which Hildegarde was most fierce over. The continual visitors meant someone must tend to the gate and door at all times. (*LRM* 130)

As Ohlson also recognizes, a small community that seems to be suffering from lack of publicity actually suffers as a result of publicity, due to the small numbers of people they have to deal with its results. Furthermore, in accepting Leopolda, Sacred Heart Convent – perhaps acting according to the monastic vow of hospitality – brings a probable psychotic (though the dividing line between mysticism and psychosis is sometimes unclear, Leopolda definitely seems to cross over to the side of the latter) into their midst. In *Love Medicine*, an adult Marie Lazarre reflects back on Leopolda’s admittance to Sacred Heart: “I heard later that Sacred Heart Convent was a catchall place for nuns that don’t get along elsewhere. Nuns that complain too much or lose their mind. I’ll always wonder now, after hearing that, where they picked up Sister Leopolda. Perhaps she had scarred someone else, the way she left a mark on me” (*Erdrich, LM* 44). It is that convent’s welcome of Leopolda that leads to Marie Lazarre’s abuse at her own mother’s – the nun Leopolda’s – hands. Clearly, the “safe” refuge of the convent has its attendant risks.

Hospitality must be held in tension with exclusion, as it indeed is in many contemporary convents and monasteries, though the guidelines for admittance vary depending on the particular order. Because the Poor Clares follow perhaps the most difficult practices, they have the most demanding criteria to be accepted as a postulant. Ohlson records a series of women applicants rejected by the Poor Clares, in spite of their
dwindling numbers: “One was a widow with grown children, but the Poor Clares turned her away – they didn’t accept anyone with children because they felt the longing to see them would be unbearable. Another woman was rejected because she had suffered a nervous breakdown years before. The nuns felt that their lifestyle was too intense for anyone with even a slight history of emotional instability” (Ohlson 122). Either of these criteria would immediately disqualify Pauline Puyat, and for good reasons.

Pauline, however, most fears that she will be excluded from the convent for another reason: race. Though Pauline’s supposed blessedness is what brings visitors to the door of the convent, she herself has only been allowed inside the door because she has denied her Native American blood. She “confesses” her ethnicity to the Mother Superior only after she has attained spiritual notoriety and is unlikely to be dismissed. Though Sacred Heart Convent welcomes social misfits whose behavior is a nuisance, racial difference is grounds for exclusion. It is the knowledge of this principle of rejection that also causes Marie Lazarre to go to the convent with the dream of becoming a saint. She avers, “There was no use in trying to ignore me any longer. I was going up there on the hill with the black robe women. They were not any lighter than me. I was going up there to pray as good as they could. Because I don’t have that much Indian blood. And they never thought they’d have a girl from the reservation as a saint they’d have to kneel to” (Erdrich, LM 43). The convent’s white women preserve their safe space by either excluding Native Americans completely or by forcing them to accept the cultural trappings of whiteness. Similarly, the benefactress of the original Convent in Morrison’s Paradise seeks to “Americanize” (and they have this term confused with “Christianize”) the Native American girls at the school: “It was an opportunity to intervene at the heart of
the problem: to bring God and language to natives who were assumed to have neither; to alter their diets, their clothes, their minds; to help them despise everything that had once made their lives worthwhile and to offer them instead the privilege of knowing the one and only God and a chance, thereby, for redemption” (Morrison 227). Here, the monastic space of the convent has a Euro-American specificity about it: those who enter within its walls will be compelled to fit a certain cultural mold.

In both Morrison and Erdrich, then, the stable, exclusive space of the convent forces those who enter in to adapt to it, rather than adapting itself to them. However, while Erdrich portrays the racial exclusion of the convent in her fictional Ojibwa reservation, her real-life experience of Catholic spaces on her grandfather’s reservation was much less racially divided. The reservation itself seems to be a sacred Catholic space: Erdrich comments in an interview:

Catholicism is very important up there at Turtle Mountain. When you go up there, you go to Church! My grandfather has had a real mixture of old time and church religion – which is another way of incorporating. He would do pipe ceremonies for ordinations and things like that. He just had a grasp on both realities, in both religions. He prayed in the woods, he prayed in the mission, to him it was all connected, and all politics. (qtd. in Walsh 119-20)

Erdrich’s grandfather does not inhabit a monastic space, but the Turtle Mountain reservation, with its emphasis on both community and religion, resembles the cloister in some ways. And, while the naming of two spaces in the last sentence of the quotation seems to imply that one space cannot make room for two different cultural practices of
religion, the earlier comment about how he performed pipe ceremonies for ordinations – which would occur within the space of a church – indicates that, at least for this Native American man, “it was all connected,” the boundaries were fluid, in part because he carried his own sacred space within him.

**Spiritual Tourism and the Portability of Monastic Space**

In *Shadows on the Rock*, too, the portability of sacred space – particularly monastic space – is emphasized. Cather states that the nuns’ ability to carry their religion – which, once they have taken vows, is their only true family, in Cather’s eyes – and its sacred objects with them is why they are the only Québécois settlers who feel no nostalgia for the Old World: “The Ursulines and the Hospitalières, indeed, were scarcely exiles. When they came across the Atlantic, they brought their family with them, their kindred, their closest friends. In whatever little wooden vessel they had laboured across the sea, they carried all; they brought to Canada the Holy Family, the saints and martyrs, the glorious company of the Apostles, the heavenly host” (Cather, *SR* 78). Furthermore, because the sacred is portable, it can be brought into the home as well as into the new homeland. For Cather and her protagonist Cécile Auclair, the convent’s rejection of married domestic women only entails that married women incorporate the monastic into the home. Cécile is perhaps the predecessor of the perspective that Martin and Mohanty critique when they write that “unity through incorporation has too often been the white middle-class feminist’s mode of adding on difference without leaving the comfort of home” (193). Instead of changing the system, Cécile creates the illusion of including monastic space within the home.
Denise Roy’s 2001 book *My Monastery Is a Minivan* suggests that, in some ways, much has stayed the same since Cather’s 1931 novel. Roy, who grew up with aspirations toward nunhood, attempts, through sappy anecdotes and pithy sayings, to convince her readers that her married life and its products – four children – have been as monastic in practice as life in a hermitage or convent. She writes, “My monastery is not a silent cell out in the wilderness. My monastery is a minivan. It is also a kitchen, a child’s bedroom, an office. My monastery is in the heart of the world – in family life, with a child on my lap, in my partner’s arms” (15). Roy seems to be reacting to her exclusion, as a married woman with children, from any sort of formal monasticism: within her narrative, however, it becomes clear that she is also responding to the pain of her exclusion, as a woman, from the kind of spiritual authority accorded to Catholic priests. Though she briefly mentions her childhood longing to be a nun, she later describes in detail how she played “Mass” with a little boy from the neighborhood, recruiting him to play the part of the priest, but taking over his role once he went home, secretly elevating and consecrating the Host, the body of Christ. The adult Roy breezily claims:

> My childhood dreams have come true.

> For two decades, I have broken bread, poured grape juice, preached, prayed, told stories, bestowed blessings, taken care of the sick, heard confessions. I have been a parent. These have been the sacraments of my daily life and, I suspect, of yours. These are simple, sacred acts. These are how we mediate love, as we minister to our own little congregations – children, spouse, family, and friends.

> I have discovered that it is a great vocation. (88)
Against the pain of rejection from the priesthood, Roy constructs her own gendered space, one centered around motherhood. Rather than celebrating motherhood on its own terms, however, she still must validate it in the terms of male sacred space, the space behind the altar.

Roy even follows Cather in dismissing the monastic’s challenges as minor, because they have no family (family, of course, in the nuclear, biological sense): “I’m sure that living in the monastery comes with its own set of graces and challenges. But I venture a guess that the holiest and wisest of monks would have a difficult time trading places with us, living in our homes with our kids and monthly bills and car-pool schedules” (Roy xiv-xv). Roy, on the other hand, seems to feel that she could take up a spot in the cloister quite easily, for she has already practiced meditation and contemplation in more “difficult” and distracting circumstances. Ohlson’s interviews with nuns, however, suggest that Roy would have extreme difficulty in the Poor Clares’ convent. For them, Ohlson writes, “the hardship came from their constant struggle for faith in a place where there was so little to distract them from its absence” (117). Crises of faith and “dry periods” of routine prayer strike harder when a person’s vocation is to a life of focused contemplation – and yet, for these Sisters, there is also greater joy, joy “which seemed to come from the times when their lifestyle held them closest to God” (Ohlson 117). This joy is based in their specific lifestyle and in their physical location within the cloister. My problem with Roy, aside from her writing style, is her apparent confidence in the placelessness of monastic spirituality, that it can be easily carried from one environment to another.
Roy’s philosophy of “I’m in a monastery wherever I am, because I can mold external reality by the strength of my spirit” contrasts directly with the Poor Clares in downtown Cleveland, who not only believe that the specificity of their lifestyle grants them greater proximity to God, but who also emphasize the importance of their particular geographical location in the heart of downtown Cleveland. When a diocesan representative worries that the nuns “were hazardously isolated in a rough neighborhood and that their elderly members needed more comfortable quarters,” the Poor Clares turn down the offer for a new, less urban, complex. Their reasoning?

The Poor Clares’ abbess told the other nun that they often climbed up on the roof of their monastery at night to look at the quiet city around them. There they prayed for the city, noting the twinkle of each distant light and the wavering lines of streets that radiated from downtown into the darkness beyond. “They wouldn’t leave St. Paul, because they didn’t want to leave the city,” Sister Beatrice continued. “They were afraid they wouldn’t be able to watch over it in the same way if they moved.” (Ohlson 24)

Though the nuns are isolated from contact with the people of Cleveland, they feel that their location is key to the effectiveness of their divine work of prayer. The subjects of their prayers also respect the particularity of place as they come to worship at St. Paul Shrine: “people from all over the city came for something they could find nowhere else” (Ohlson 62) – this something is, of course, the Poor Clares themselves and their coverage of each hour, each minute, of the day in prayer. Ohlson gives the label of “spiritual tourists” to those who come, after her article is published, solely to see the Poor Clares
She ponders whether the specificity of St. Paul’s location will actually prove to be a turn-off in the long run to this sort of churchgoer: “I wondered how long these new people would come to mass here, whether the shrine’s bleak neighborhood was so far out of their orbit that this would be a singular visit.” “But,” she acknowledges, “I, too, had been a spiritual tourist and was now one of the regulars” (Ohlson 90). Spiritual tourism does, at least, recognize the importance of place, even in the realms of the spirit—and some people commit themselves to the places they initially visit, becoming dwellers rather than tourists.

Spiritual tourism, however, more often displays its negative side, especially when specific monastic sites become interchangeable places for the tourist to serially pick up, use, and drop. In her 1992 memoir *Virgin Time*, writer and professor Patricia Hampl expressed the fear that she will become one of these dissatisfied, unplaced wanderers. At the advice of her nun friend Donnie (Sister Madonna), Hampl has journeyed to Italy to visit the places where St. Frances and St. Clare walked. When she arrives, however, Hampl is disappointed with her inability to sense the heart of contemplative life in these locations. While she had refused to term her trip a “pilgrimage,” as Donnie did (Hampl 6), Hampl had somehow expected to find spiritual sustenance there. She laments, “But if not here, where? Was I going to become one of those fitful souls, trucking from ashram to monastery, saving up money to make it to India and then jetting back home, disillusioned by an anorectic guru but still plenty hungry for enlightenment, hieing myself next to a hermitage in the Sinai, followed by a convent in Colorado?” (Hampl 37). Such individuals (“women usually,” Hampl observes) claim that their tourism respects the particularity of place, but in their repeated journeys, they reveal that all sacred spaces
– of all religions – are available to be appropriated for their own use. A pilgrim, by contrast, usually sets a journey to one specific place as a lifetime goal, maintaining a spiritual commitment to this place even if they only visit once.

In monastic history, the idea of a stable, housed community versus a wandering one has been a divisive issue. As Hampl explains, “There was a lot of wandering about in the Middle Ages, much of it by pilgrims and itinerant monks attached to no specific monastery. Such wandering monks, called *girovaghi*, were a social embarrassment, trading on the commitment to hospitality that governed the grand monastic houses” (86). Kathleen Norris adds that St. Benedict himself, the sixth-century founder of one of the most influential monastic traditions, disapproved of these gyrovagues, these “restless” monks (Norris 344). But, by the late Middle Ages, the luxury of life in the stable communities – a luxury Benedict would also have stoutly condemned – reinforced the mooching lifestyle of the gyrovagues – that is, until St. Francis came along and called for reform of both forms of monasticism. He and his followers took their vows of poverty seriously, adapting the life of the truly poor, the homeless. He and his friars “had what they called the Chapter of Mats. They slept outside at night on mats and wandered during the days asking for food” (Ohlson 97). Monks had this opportunity, but nuns were constrained by the gender prejudices of the era: “Francis initially had the idea that Clare would follow his lead, but the notion that women could live like this – unhoused and unfettered – was a scandalous notion at the time” (Ohlson 97). Perhaps the denial of this possibility is part of the reason that women constitute a majority of today’s gyrovagues.

Like the pre-Franciscan wandering monks of the Middle Ages, today’s spiritual tourists are enabled by their economic privilege, their financial resources for travel. As
with feminist Rosi Braidotti’s appropriation of nomadism as a philosophical metaphor, spiritual tourists imitate a real lifestyle that grants them superficial affinity with the poor, while they never have to relinquish the comfort of money – since, according to them, everything is spiritual rather than material, anyway. Braidotti writes in the full confidence in the power of metaphor to trump material conditions: “As an intellectual style, nomadism consists not so much in being homeless, as in being capable of recreating your home everywhere. The nomad carries her/his essential belongings with her/him wherever s/he goes and can recreate a home base anywhere” (16). Here we see echoes of Cather’s passage about the portability of the nuns’ spirituality across the ocean, as well as premonitions of Roy’s attempt to carry the monastery inside the home. None of these writers takes sufficient account of the realities that govern the metaphorical subject’s life: the nomad’s need to travel to find water and pastureland in the desert, and the monastic’s vow of poverty – not to mention the vow of stability, which Benedictines and many other orders make and abide by. The vow of stability not only grounds Benedictines in a particular community, but it also refers to spiritual stability – an unshakable faith one can hold to, even when one doesn’t believe for oneself.

**Stability and Continual Conversion**

Since the publication of Biddy Martin and Chandra Mohanty’s landmark essay, “Feminist Politics: What’s Home Got to Do with It?” the concept of “stability,” particularly when associated with religion, has few positive associations. For Martin and Mohanty, as they read Minnie Bruce Pratt, the buildings of one’s “home” create an illusion of safety for women: however, “the very stability, familiarity, and security of
these physical structures are undermined by the discovery that these buildings and streets witnessed and obscured” various forms of oppression (Martin and Mohanty 196). Martin and Mohanty deal primarily with the “white, middle-class Christian” home (as if this in itself is a monolithic structure), but Linda Karrell, in her article “Safe Space and Storytelling: Willa Cather’s Shadows on the Rock,” applies their argument to religious space, particularly that of the novel’s hermit Jeanne Le Ber. As Karrell argues, “while the text’s representations of religious spaces reveal an obsession with coherence and stability, the contradictions between those representations simultaneously force the reader . . . to acknowledge that coherence and stability may come at a cost to women and are highly tenuous” (149). That cost is, above all, remaining bound to the illusion of safety. While this interpretation may indeed apply to Shadows on the Rock, Benedictine monasticism has within it another vow that exists in productive tension with the vow of stability, challenging the self and forcing it to move out of its safe, walled-off space. Though, as Erdrich and Morrison reveal, the convent’s history is not free from oppression, ideally the vow of conversatio keeps one questioning the justice of one’s relationship to others. 

Conversatio refers to the monastic’s commitment to continual conversion, to neverending spiritual restlessness and desire for a more intimate relationship to God. It may seem to conflict with the vow of stability, but one is often most challenged to growth when one lives in close proximity (say, two cells away) from extremely different individuals. Conversatio and stability, when practiced together, ensure that unpredictability is the one thing monastics can count on. As Esther de Waal explains this paradox between the two vows,
The Benedictine vow of stability calls me to stand still, to stand firmly planted not on any plot of ground (which is likely to be impossible) but within myself, not running away from who I am. Yet in the vow of *conversatio morum* (which literally translated means ‘conversion of manners’ or ‘conversion of life’) I am presented with the necessity of living open to continual conversion, ready to grow and change and move on. On the one hand I find that I must stay still; on the other, that I need continually to change. (33)

Among contemporary American women writers, Kathleen Norris perhaps best embodies this tension, due to her knowledge of Benedictine spirituality and her commitments as a Benedictine oblate.³

It is clear from the titles of Norris’s first two non-poetry publications that she has not stayed entirely in one spot as a result of her spiritual commitment. While *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (1993) tells of the author finding her spiritual home – and her spiritual frontier – in the plains of South Dakota, *The Cloister Walk* (1996) narrates her several extended stays at St. John’s Abbey in Minnesota. The key here, however, is that she values the specifics of each location, rather than viewing all locations as potential mines from which to extract spiritual lessons, as the spiritual tourist does. The cloister and the prairie sometimes exchange roles in her mind because they are the two primary locations in her spiritual geography, but this does not lead to a naive faith in her ability to transform any condition, anywhere, into a monastic space. As in *Dakota* Norris had found

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³ An oblate makes professions of *conversatio*, stability, and obedience, but not the official vows that a formal member of an order does (poverty, chastity, etc.), and they usually do not dwell in a convent or monastery. Thus, an oblate may be married and may even be Protestant; Norris herself is both.
that the limits of her geographical location opened up new spiritual possibilities for her, so in *The Cloister Walk* she comes to find that enclosed sacred spaces, even spaces bounded by liturgy as well as by physical walls, can be as liberating to the spirit as the wide, open plains. While participating in a processional at the monastery’s church, Norris experiences a sudden reversal in her perception of the building’s space:

> It was the reverse of an experience most adults have had, of returning to a place that had seemed vast in childhood, and finding it pathetically small. This church was a place I thought I knew, a big space I’d tamed by my daily presence there. Now I was discovering that it was wild after all, and could roar like the sea. Walking on the terrazzo floor, I was reminded of a recurring dream, in which I move through the galaxy, stepping delicately (and sometimes leaping) from star to star. This sunlit room now seemed such an expanse, my every step daring an enormous distance. (265)

Here, the familiar not only becomes *unheimlich*, but also takes on the wildness of nature, of sea and sky. When she returns home to Dakota in the middle of one of her monastic stays, Norris’s spiritual geography also transforms the outdoors into an indoor space. Experiencing dissatisfaction with the literal indoor space of her house, she writes, “The wisdom of the few, struggling trees on the Plains, and the vast spaces around them, are a continual reminder that my life is cluttered by comparison. At home, an abundance of books and papers overlays the heavy furniture I inherited from my grandparents. A perfectly simple room, with one perfect object to meditate on, remains a dream until I step outside, onto the Plains. A tree. A butte. The sunrise” (Norris 296). The Plains have become the perfect, simple monastic cell, ideal for spiritual contemplation – but this
transformation seems a gift that Norris receives, unlike Roy, who credits her power to find the monastery everywhere to her own spiritual ability to disregard material reality.

There are elements of conscious attempt in Norris’s spiritual geography: whenever she returns to her house in South Dakota, she attempts “to keep as much of the monastery in [her] as possible” (Norris 267). Again, this monastic spirituality and its valuation of specific locations calls her back to the reality of her own geographical place, and to love of that place: “Above all, I try to remember where I am: a small town on the Great Plains that may not be here in fifty years” (Norris 267). Norris recognizes the fragility of “home,” and, unlike the home-defenders whom Martin and Mohanty describe, she recognizes that her home must change in order to continue existing – again, stability and conversatio held in tension. As in Shadows on the Rock, a religious space grows because it continues changing, because it has a future, unlike the stagnant Old World. In the New World – for Norris, both the monastery and the prairie – change is constant; a society stays the same and avoids stagnation by continuing to progress. Norris ascribes this same paradoxical quality to the cloister and to South Dakota. She explains that she lives in the Dakota land because “at its very best it becomes my monastery, which progresses like a river, by running in place, its currents strong and life-sustaining” (Norris 350). This description seems natural for a Benedictine oblate like Norris, who takes the vow of continual conversion of the self. The river running in place is able to hold together the two apparent contradictions central to Benedictine spirituality: “If I stand still without moving on I am in danger of becoming static, of failing to grow, possibly even of fossilizing. If I journey on without remaining still in my innermost being I am in danger of becoming a wanderer, someone who is endlessly searching” (de Waal 52-3).
One of the things that allows the monastic space, whether within the walls of a monastery or on the Great Plains, to be ever-changing is the resident’s commitment to it. Commitment and responsibility to a community – and to the earth itself – can be interpreted as costs involved in a religious space, as freedom that must be given up in order to be accepted there. Minnie Bruce Pratt, writing partly of her Christian upbringing, reflects this perspective when she claims that her “experience of a safe space to be was based on . . . my submitting to the limits of that place” (qtd. in Martin and Mohanty 207). However, within the Christian monastic tradition, submission of the self brings freedom – and Christian monastic space is far from safe, for it challenges the self to continually change and grow. De Waal explains that monastic spirituality asks for “self-surrender, a word that has unfortunate overtones in the English language, for it always seems to carry a suggestion of defeat, of submission. But the French equivalent . . . gives a quite different sense. Se livrer is much more positive. It means to hand over or to deliver oneself over to, with the connotation of a freely chosen act of love” (de Waal 94). In Christian monasticism, delivering the self over brings deliverance from the self’s boundaries, though it by no means guarantees avoidance of suffering. In fact, it breaks down some of the barriers between self and others, and between self and place. As Norris writes, “To attach oneself to place is to surrender to it, and suffer with it” (244).

For Norris, this relinquishment of freedom is preferable to its opposite, the myth of American freedom: “To be an American is to move on, as if we could resist change” (244). Even convents and monasteries are not immune from the threat of those who seek spiritual homes without commitment. Norris quotes Jeremiah 2:25’s command – “Stop wearing out your shoes” – and then comments, “Good advice for us in America, in a
society grown alarmingly mobile, where retreats and spirituality workshops have become such a hot consumer item one wonders if seeking the holy had become an end in itself” (34). Monastic spiritual experience has become a desirable commodity, but instead of seeking to incorporate it into their everyday lives, contemporary spiritual tourists seek an illusory feeling of authenticity by making weekend stays at whatever monastery or convent suits their spiritual preferences of the moment. Hampl, the other contemporary writer who deals with the issue of spiritual tourism, agrees with Norris when she writes, “The open road wasn’t for pilgrims, it was for tourists.” However, Hampl then continues by wishing for a kind of placelessness: “Spiritual life wasn’t a quest, it was a disappearing act. I wanted to tell Donnie that I wanted to fade, to vanish” (Hampl 189). Hampl here is truly longing for some sort of challenge to the self’s boundaries, something to erase the lines dividing self and place – a transformation the spiritual tourist never achieves. However, Hampl’s wish to accomplish this through disappearance is troubling because it suggests the old female desire to extinguish oneself and one’s desires. Norris, rather than choosing the path of self-immolation, places herself in specifics, the monastery and the prairie, and finds that interacting with the sharp reality of these places keeps her from self-centered stagnancy. Temporary stops do not issue the same sort of challenge, because one doesn’t stay there long enough to put down roots or to encounter the friction with its walls, the friction that leads to growth. Norris illustrates this principle in her response to a bellhop in a Chicago hotel, who asked her to describe the Trappist monastery from which she’d just arrived. As Norris tells the story, “‘Well,’ I replied, looking around the hotel room, ‘it was more real, almost the opposite of this. It was a place you felt you could stay forever’” (152). For Norris, the hotel room is more
confining than the monastic cell, which offers possibilities for growth when its small space is consciously chosen.

“Felicitous Space” and *Temps Vierge*

In *Felicitous Space: the Imaginative Structures of Edith Wharton and Willa Cather*, Judith Fryer describes her title phrase in the following words: “Center implies circumference, a place in space. To find the center of one’s boundless desire, to give it form, is to begin in a space that is felicitous, one that frees the imagination . . . a place that can be both sacred and touched, one that concentrates being within limits that protect” (Fryer 293). Making an amazingly similar call for a special kind of monastic space, Trappist monk Thomas Merton writes:

The contemplative life must provide an area, a space of liberty, of silence, in which possibilities are allowed to surface and new choices – beyond routine choice – become manifest. It should create a new experience of time, not as stopgap stillness, but as ‘*temps vierge*’ – not a blank to be filled or an untouched space to be conquered and violated, but a space which can enjoy its own potentialities and hopes – and its own presence to itself. One’s *own* time. (qtd. in Hampl 224-25)

Both felicitous space and *temps vierge* – virgin time – are filled with possibilities invisible to the average observer, who sees only enclosing walls and emptiness (both the emptiness and spareness of monastic space and the emptiness so often associated with virgin women, especially in the male imagination). The cloister, however, is a space
where women recover the freedom of limits and the fullness of virginity, both physical and metaphorical.

Like Merton, Kathleen Norris complains of the associations the word “virginity” has taken on, lamenting that “Current dictionary definitions of ‘virginity’ are of little use in helping us to discover why, in legends of the Christian West, virginity has so consistently been associated with the power to heal, why the virgin spring is a place of healing” (200). In contrast to these ancient resonances, she reports that the American Heritage Dictionary defines “virgin” as a “‘pure, natural, unsullied state, unused, uncultivated, unexplored, as in virgin territory,’ a definition that allows for, and anticipates, use, exploration, exploitation” (Norris 200). As a corrective to the dictionary definition, Norris supplies a quotation from her college friend, feminist Andrea Dworkin: “In the male frame, virginity is virtually synonymous with ignorance [read: emptiness]; in the woman’s frame, it is the recovery of the capacity to know by direct experience of the world” (qtd. in Norris 200). “Direct experience of the world” is not something people usually associate with virginity or with women in cloisters, but the fresh, almost unmediated (mediated by ritual, but not by the standards of home or of contemporary society) quality of their opportunity to encounter the divine is what strikes some women upon entering a convent. As Hampl writes of the appeal of virgin spaces, “The monastery was the hive, the laboratory of life’s mystery” (14) – in other words, a place where one can experiment for oneself and discover secrets, a place buzzing with intellectual and spiritual activity. Norris, too, finds the same analogy, this time provided by her subconscious: “The first time I went to a monastery, I dreamed about the place for a week, and the most vivid dream was of the place as a chemistry lab? Might religion be
seen as an experiment in human chemistry?” (Norris 63). As spaces associated with this kind of vital virginity, this experimental excitement, the cloister’s limits provide a fullness that is ever expanding.

If virgin spaces are viewed, by either men or women, as frontiers to be exploited, the exploiters will never gain the freedom of willful surrender to a place. If the felicitous time of the cloister – time to be alone and contemplative – is misused as a “safe” and comfortable refuge, no growth will occur and the self will remain trapped in the familiar. The tensions between exclusion and exploitation, between hospitality and solitude, between safety and challenge, between stability and constant change, govern the spiritual geography of the cloister. In the end, perhaps the only way to map the cloister’s geography is to refuse to pin it down. Ohlson comes to this conclusion in Stalking the Divine:

I had hoped to work my way through this book and emerge with an understanding of what their lives are like. The truth is that I really don’t know. Even if they had allowed me to come inside and watch them day and night, I still don’t think I would know. . . . they actually live in a place called faith. I’ve been trying to use these women’s stories to pin faith down and map it out. But every time I think I have the map spread out neatly before me, parts of it curl up, break apart, or just fade away. (240-41)

Recognizing the limits of the scholar’s ability to ferret out the secrets of the cloister, however, places Ohlson within the monastic act of choosing to surrender to a place, even if one doesn’t fully understand it. Unlike the voyeur or the tourist, the monastic’s
experiments with the limits of place – and the limits of self – lead one to understand that monastic spirituality cannot be mapped, though it can be placed, in the fullest sense of that word.
Epilogue: Whither the Spiritual Geography of the City?

“On the holy mount stands the city he founded; the Lord loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwelling places of Jacob. Glorious things of you are spoken, O city of God.” Psalm 87:1-3

“And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.’” Revelation 21:2-3

You would think that, with all the emphasis given to cities in the Old and New Testaments, we would see plenty of narratives of urban spiritual geography throughout Christian history. With the exception of the “East Halsey Street” setting remembered by Avey Johnson of Paule Marshall’s Praisesong for the Widow, the spiritual terrain of the works I have discussed has been primarily rural. In part, this is because the works of spiritual geography addressed here focus on a connection to a place associated with one’s biological mother, and thus with the past, a past that was certainly more rural for earlier generations.

In addition, our contemporary cultural mythos disregards the city’s potential to play a role in spiritual geography. Robert Orsi argues:

The religious ethos of white middle-class America at the end of the twentieth century is dominated by a spirit of ‘expressive individualism’ . . . that is more likely to identify mountaintops and ocean beaches as places evocative of religious feelings than street corners and the basements of housing projects; and religion, in this common understanding, is a matter
of feeling rather than a practice, authority, discipline within a tradition, or of feeding the spirits. (42)

Even monastic communities, which were originally conceived as attempts to replicate the “city of God” here on earth, have been settings for spiritual narratives usually only if they are rural monasteries, monasteries in touch with the natural world around them. The city seems averse to the kind of peace and quiet that contemplative monks crave, and most writers—surprise, surprise—are drawn more to contemplative orders than active ones. Even Kathleen Norris, whose lecture tours take her to cities, compares the city negatively with the monastery, which she views as the true “civitas”—the true community of souls striving for a life together. She writes at one point in The Cloister Walk, while narrating a trip to New York City, “Being in the city is good for my monastic soul” (69), but this statement places being in the city as a kind of monastic discipline, undergone for the soul’s completeness rather than for joy in the experience itself.

Part of the American spiritual narrative’s scorn for the city is, of course, due to the particular forms of Protestant Christianity that have become prevalent in this country. For the most part, evangelical Protestants have chosen an interpretation of Augustine’s City of God that draws a sharp distinction between the heavenly, spiritual, future “city of God” and the earthly, material, present “city of man.” Ironically, the belief that the heavenly city is only spiritual has resulted in the (very material) evangelical retreat from cities because real cities, with all their material reality, contrast too greatly with the ideal heavenly city.

50 Of course, a few fundamentalist Christians focus exclusively on the materiality of the Holy City, insisting that it can only refer to the literal Jerusalem, but this is not a large trend among published women writers of American spiritual geography.
Augustine’s more immediate successors read him very differently, however. Medieval theologians—as well as more humble religious practitioners—emphasized the potential for imitating the city of God—as closely as possible—here on earth. The center of the medieval city was the cathedral: a reminder pointing away to the heavenly city, but also a celebration of human creativity and connectivity on earth. The monastery functioned at the city’s heart, but urban “civic life in itself, with its organized community of people living in concord, could be just as much a way to God as monastic life” (Sheldrake, Spaces 152). A whole literary genre, *laudes civitatis*, developed in praise of the utopian ideals of the city (Spaces 152).

Of course, recreating such a genre—or such a city—is undesirable, as well as highly impractical in America’s diverse cities. But I do want to raise the question: what can we do to re-envision the city as a potential site for narratives of spiritual geography, and what effects (both spiritual and material) could these narratives have on the city in turn?

Again, I turn to Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* to illustrate the importance of spatio-spiritual narratives: “In modern Athens, the vehicles of mass transportation are called *metaphorai*. To go to work or come home, one takes a ‘metaphor’—a bus or a train. Stories could also take this noble name: every day, they traverse and organize places; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries of them. They are spatial trajectories” (115). Metaphors—and narratives—“traverse and organize places”; they can build up or break down boundaries established by dominant narratives. After all, what troubles our cities more than the geographical divides established by dominant narratives about race, class, and national origin?
Narratives of spiritual geography, especially those with an incarnational focus that locates the divine in expressions of human culture, have the power to re-draw these boundaries while still maintaining each culture’s unique particularity. As Wesley Kort writes, “The mapping of social spaces, especially of cities, privileges abstraction and the total grid. We need to augment maps with stories. . . . Narrative space and narrative time are powerful and meaningful counters to the effects of abstraction created by clocks and maps” (165). Stories of spiritual geography, by emphasizing the particular—and the personal in relation to both the social and the transcendent—can contest mappings of the city as “profane” space.

Furthermore, if narratives of spiritual geography begin to re-map the city, the often urban experience of literal immigrants and exiles may begin to correct the false claims of “marginality” among women writers and theorists who occupy more central positions of power. Spiritual narratives of the city may force us to face uncomfortable truths about ourselves and the boundaries we have drawn to exclude the other and the Other from our lives. Norris’s one positive treatment of the city comes in the chapter “The Only City in America” (though the quote comes from Thomas Merton and is actually about the small Trappist monastery of Gethsemani), and here she writes, “Cities remind us that the desire to escape from the problems of other people by fleeing to a suburb, small town, or a monastery, is an unholy thing, and ultimately self-defeating. We can no more escape from other people than we can escape from ourselves” (379). For Norris, the city’s spirituality derives from its inevitable community; in essence, she argues that an urban spirituality must accompany one to the monastery if one wishes to dwell there fully. Norris also issues a more pointed challenge to all who claim a Christian
spirituality, whether they live in the city or elsewhere: “Can you say, with Isaiah, ‘About Zion I will not be silent, about Jerusalem I will not rest, until her integrity shines out like the dawn, and her salvation flames like a torch’?” (380).

“I will not be silent.” “I will not be silent” until the city—here, as is usually the case, gendered female—is recognized as more than simply a den of iniquity (whether that iniquity is defined as moral degradation or economic injustice or what-have-you). Feminism is so often about breaking silence. What does it mean for us to contemplate anew breaking our culture’s silence about the city? What urban places has patriarchal spirituality marginalized, and how will women’s spiritual narratives of the city redress this imbalance?

One significant American work of urban spiritual geography that does begin to question patriarchal religion’s mapping of the city, though from a male perspective, is James Baldwin’s semi-autobiographical novel Go Tell It on the Mountain. John Grimes’s Pentecostal father has his own religious interpretive grid through which he sees the city. Broadway, for example, is “the way that led to death.” As Robert Orsi summarizes it, “John’s father’s religious imagination recasts the topography of the city for the boy, and Baldwin’s autobiographical character must eventually free himself, as Baldwin did, from the crushing coordinates of his father’s mapping of the city in order to live as he himself wishes” (53).

In American culture, mapping of the city as “evil” or “sinful” is not unrelated to gender issues. As Wesley Kort writes, borrowing from Doreen Massey:
	negative appraisals of the city are often deeply gendered and that they arise not only from the feminization of space but also from the city as
lacking order and producing vertigo in the male observer. . . . Since cities are the sites of greater material and cultural opportunities for women and other oppressed peoples, negative appraisals of the city cannot avoid an implied negative appraisal of the recently actualized spaces of freedom.

(217).

Women geographers such as Massey and Gillian Rose are at the forefront of contesting male-dominated narratives about the city, and their work is highly significant in both theory and practice. Such remapping of the city no doubt occurs in women’s spiritual writing, too. But do we have the eyes to see it?

Greater attention to the urban elements in women’s spiritual geographies may even help to redress some of the more appropriative trends I have discussed in narratives of religion and place. In large part, white writers’ appropriation of Native American spirituality occurs because of European Americans’ lack of connection to “nature.” However, if our concept of “nature” is broadened to include animal and plant life in the city, as well as the products of human creativity—in other words, the particular surroundings in which so many of us dwell—these impulses to appropriate another culture’s longstanding spiritual relationship with place may be diminished. The contemporary Canadian poet John Terpstra serves as a positive example of this new appreciation of urban spiritual geography. Though he acknowledges his status as a non-native Canadian and as a city-dweller, he does not relinquish the importance of a spiritual connection to his location. His poetry embodies “not only a recognition of the sacramental in the physical geography of the natural environment, but also a recognition
of the inescapably religious nature of the social and humanmade geography that depends upon it” (Bowen 192-3).

Indeed, one of the benefits of paying greater heed to urban spiritual geographies is that they force us to recognize the social—and political—construction of place, whether for good or ill. Most American spiritual narratives of the past, whether by men or women, have focused on the individual’s relationship with God, often as mediated through an isolated natural environment. Even the emphasis on maternal heritage among the writers I have studied has a fairly individualistic focus. Spiritual geographies of the city, however, chronicle the individual’s experience within community, eschewing both individuality and universality while maintaining particularity. Of course, it is also possible to find this delicate balance in non-urban spiritual geographies; however, tracing the dynamic relationship between individual, community, place, and the divine in the city may help us to better recognize its existence in narratives set elsewhere.

Perhaps the first step is to turn our attention to American women’s spiritual narratives that already have an urban element, under-analyzed by scholars. A prime example is Dorothy Day’s spiritual autobiography *The Long Loneliness*. Day, a journalist, socialist, Catholic convert, and founder of the Catholic Worker movement, lived in cities most of her life, and urban geography plays a significant role in her spirituality. Belden Lane points out that *The Long Loneliness* “can be outlined geographically as a movement from the streets of Manhattan to the protective seclusion of Staten Island and back again. Her life was a passage from confused impermanence to the temporary security afforded by marriage and householding and on, at last, to a bold and voluntary placelessness” (*Landscapes* 192)—or rather, I would argue, to a bold and
voluntary dwelling within the city as sacred space, the place in which her spiritual story intertwined with the lives of others.

Experiencing a childhood in San Francisco during the great earthquake of 1906, growing up in an apartment in Chicago, becoming a young journalist in New York City: these were all formative experiences in Day’s early spirituality and politics (which, for her, could not be separated). Having just moved to New York City, she found its streets very different from those of Chicago’s slums, where she used to stroll with her baby brother:

The poverty of New York was appallingly different from that of Chicago. The very odors were different. . . . There is a smell in the walls of such tenements, a damp ooze coming from them in the halls. One’s very clothes smell of it. It is not the smell of life, but of the grave.

And yet, as I walked those streets back in 1917 I wanted to go and live among these surroundings; in some mysterious way I felt that I would never be freed from this burden of loneliness and sorrow unless I did.

(Day 51)

In some ways, Day herself admits, her desire to live among the city’s poor represented a romantic view of poverty. However, once she did live in the Bowery, once she herself was poor, she still maintained the view that, given her spiritual calling, she could not live elsewhere.

This is not to say that she didn’t first experiment with life in a more serene, less smelly place. During her common-law marriage to Forster Batterham, she moved to a beach house in Staten Island. There, she writes, she was at peace, but it “was a peace,
curiously enough, divided against itself. I was happy but my very happiness made me know that there was a greater happiness to be obtained from life than any I had ever known. I began to think, to weigh things, and it was at this time that I began consciously to pray more” (Day 116). It was also at this time that she became pregnant.

The relationship between Day and Batterham disintegrated because of her growing religious conviction; first she had her newborn daughter baptized in the Catholic Church, and then Day herself was baptized and confirmed. Her religious searching had been concentrated by her time at the beach house, but she knew that it could not be lived out anywhere except among the city’s poor. The city, to Day, is both the domain of spiritual striving and of spiritual and cultural abundance. Of her return to New York City, she writes, “One can conceive of a city with art and culture and music and architecture, and the flowering of all good things, as the image of the heavenly city. Heaven is pictured as a city, the heavenly Jerusalem. I was enjoying the city that summer” (Day 159).

And there she stayed for the rest of her life. Though the Catholic Worker movement started communal farms in several locations, these were more the project of Day’s associate Peter Maurin than of Day herself—and they were never half as successful as the Catholic Workers’ hospitality houses and labor activism in the cities. According to the Catholic Worker spirituality, place ideally “is that which can enhance and enrich one’s very being, opening one to a greater spaciousness” (Lane, Landscapes 200). It is intended “not for self-protection and preservation, but for self-exposure. It becomes an occasion for vulnerability and risk. In this way, it truly makes possible an extension of the person, an expansion of one’s being” (Landscapes 205).
Because place, for Day and the Catholic Worker movement, was essential to their spirituality of vulnerability, when they were served an eviction notice at their main center of operation, they were devastated. Day’s commitment was now not only to the city in general, but also to this particular neighborhood. She writes at this point in her autobiography, “We cannot abandon a work that is begun; we cannot walk away and leave a family which has grown up around us” (Day 283). The depth of the Catholic Worker commitment to this particular place was such that “[t]his very conviction made us look [for a new building] in our own neighborhood so that we would not be leaving the Bowery” (283).

From a childhood rooted in San Francisco and Chicago, to a youthful romanticism about the urban poor in general, to the bourgeois-Bohemian escapism of her young womanhood, to a specific, grounded, spiritual commitment to a particular urban environment, Dorothy Day’s *The Long Loneliness* structures her spiritual narrative around her changing relationships to the city and to cities. This is simply one story—one story that never explicitly addresses patriarchal control over the city or over religion. Nevertheless, Day’s spiritual geography remaps the spiritual terrain of New York, though few critics have paid attention to this aspect of her work. This is what, ideally, stories of incarnational Christian spiritual geography have to offer: like Day, who “sought to give placement to those who were uprooted and to uproot those who were ensconced in overly-secure places” (Lane, Landscapes 189), narratives of spiritual geography can give placement within religious traditions to women who have been forced out by patriarchal religious narratives. The same space, the space dominated by patriarchy, can, like the city, be transformed by the stories we tell about it.
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