
Remembering Migration and Removal in American Indian Women's Poetry

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Criticism of American Indian literature has long examined the centrality of home and place in the work of American Indian storytellers and writers. For example, Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna) argues, "Human identity, imagination and storytelling were inextricably linked to the land, to Mother Earth, just as the strands of the spider's web radiate from the center of the web" (21). Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna/Sioux) similarly writes:

We are the land. To the best of my understanding, that is the fundamental idea that permeates American Indian life; the land (Mother) and the people (mothers) are the same. As Luther Standing Bear has said of his Lakota people, "We are of the soil and the soil is of us." The earth is the source and the being of the people, and we are equally the being of the earth. (119)

The links that join American Indian peoples and particular landscapes form the core of cultural identity and a sense of belonging. Silko and Allen suggest that the sacredness of particular landscapes transcends ordinary concepts of familiarity and home to become deeply interwoven in the basic identity of the native cultures that live there.

This critical emphasis on home and sacred places challenges racist images of the wandering savage that have populated Anglo stories of American Indians since the time of the Puritans. The Puritans associated a "rude," "barbaric" and "rootless" nomadism with American Indians, a wandering that precluded Native peoples from a so-called "civilized" relationship to family and home. Of course, such a characterization acted to justify the centuries of dispossession and removal that the Puritans helped to initiate. However, the movements of American Indian peoples over land, I contend, is not in opposition to a deep connection to place and particular landscapes; rather, physical movement and a sense of place are intimately intertwined. While scholars over the last several decades have taken issues of place, identity, and story in many intriguing and promising directions, it seems to me that this concentrated focus on "placedness" has tended to obscure the frequency of images

in American Indian literature of fluidity and movement *across* land. Descriptions of movement and walking across land in the poetry of three contemporary American Indian poets—Wendy Rose, Luci Tapahonso, and Linda Hogan—reimagine histories of migration and policies of removal and relocation. These poets engage physical movement to articulate cultural and personal identity, historical trauma, and communal resistance and survival.

Ashinaabe writer and critic Gerald Vizenor ties American Indian mobility directly to issues of sovereignty. “Native sovereignty,” he states, “is the right of motion” (182). Vizenor links mobility to the selfhood and origin of Native peoples; movement within stories and across land becomes inseparable from identity. He asserts, “Natives have been on the move since the creation of motion in stories; motion is the originary” (55). Similarly, Navajo critic Reid Gómez suggests, “There is no finished story, because like the people, it too is always in motion. It is a breathing and changing thing. Like the landscape, it will exist and continue on long after this writing and your reading—in motion, with no final words and no retractions” (159). Vizenor and Gómez trace the strands of story, movement, and identity to a common origin. They suggest that for many American Indian peoples, identity and worldview are intimately bound up in land, story, and physical freedom, all of which are marked by the always present potential for change and movement. Vizenor’s claim that “stories of natives on the move are common” (49), reinforces the centrality of motion in many American Indian texts, where motion appears in both actual physical movement and the fluidity of story.

Luci Tapahonso writes that many secular and informal Navajo stories “indicate distances over a wide area, mostly desert, sometimes mountain” (“Come” 76). “Distance,” she argues, “is perhaps important only in the convenience of renewal, of going back to renew yourself. This philosophy accepts adaptation, and it allows for change. Renewal is possible wherever there is distance, and wherever there is space and land” (“Come” 80). Tapahonso’s statement suggests that being “in place” and being in movement are not separate ideas for Navajo people, but rather depend on one another to create a sense of identity and the possibility of renewal. Walking across *Diné Bikéyah*, the Navajo homeland, provides a sense of connection to the landscape and a validation of cultural and personal identity.

In Hopi/Miwok poet Wendy Rose’s poem “Walking on the prayersticks,” the speaker expresses a parallel sense of sacredness, place, and connection as she walks out on Hopi land, land shared as sacred with the Navajo:

When we go to the fields
we always sing; we walk
each of us at different times

on a world held
like a feathered and fetished prayerstick.
We map our lives this way: trace our lineage
(1-6)

The poem connects the act of walking across the land with cultural history and memory. Walking itself is highlighted in the second line of the poem where “we walk” is broken off from the images around it. Yet “we walk” goes beyond the suggestion of the physical importance of movement, as it connects the Hopi in the same action, in the same place, and in different times. Further, it is through the connection between movement, place, memory, and the sacred that Hopi culture remains vital. The speaker asserts, “Nothing is old/about us yet” (11-12). Hopi cultural identity and vitality emerges from a continued commitment to “map [their] lives” and “trace [their] lineage” in movement and place. Rose’s poem reflects the idea that identity, like story, is always on the move, always *becoming*.

In his discussion of N. Scott Momaday’s book *House Made of Dawn*, Larry Evers contends that, “By imagining who and what they are in relation to particular landscapes, [native] cultures and individual members of cultures form a close relation with those landscapes....A sense of place derives from the perception of a culturally imposed symbolic order on a particular physical topography” (212). In Rose’s poem, that act of imagination is achieved through movement over the land—physical engagement with place. The speaker maintains, “This is where we first learned to sing/on ancient mornings” (21-22). She continues by articulating a deep identification between people and land:

because our skin was
red sand, because our eyes
floated in flashflood water,
because our pain was made
of burdens bound in cornhusk,
because our joy flowed
over the land,
because in touching ourselves
we touched everything.
(23-31)

Rose’s speaker echoes the conviction that identity and place are not only connected, they are inseparable. Rose’s poem emphasizes that these links have been in place since time immemorial; the speaker’s movement across Hopi land mirrors and replicates the movement of generations of Hopi before her. Walking on Hopi land is a sacred movement, a reaffirmation of place, memory, and identity.

Although movement across, away from, and back to a particular homeland can serve as a means of connecting more deeply with history and place, forced removal threatens violently to separate a people from place and to therefore disrupt culture, identity, and survival. Forced removal enacts a violent division of the people from their land that dislocates them in both place and space. Forced movement away from the land imposes a movement away from a coherent identity.

In 1864, after a series of U.S. military incursions into the Navajo homeland, *Diné Bikéyah*, 8,354 Navajo made the forced 325 mile walk from their traditional land in the Four Corners area, to Fort Sumner, or *Hwééldi*, along the Pecos River in Eastern New Mexico. Four years later when they were finally allowed to return to a fragment of their homeland, nearly a third of those people had been lost to smallpox and other illnesses, depression, severe weather, and starvation (Taphonso, *Sáanii* 7). For the Navajo, the Long Walk changed the meaning of walking and moving across the land. The walking they experienced on the journey to *Hwééldi* broke their bodies and displaced them from their land. Navajo writer Irwin Morris states that away from *Diné Bikéyah*, the Navajo discovered that “the land does not know us” (Morris 20). The Long Walk threatened to disrupt the vital links between movement, land, and identity; forced migration robbed the people of their freedom of movement and therefore their sovereignty. Yet, despite the physical and mental hardship, walking also offered a vital means of redefining the horrors of forced migration. In Luci Taphonso’s poem “In 1864,” images of walking offer a language for expressing pain and renewal; the tragedy of removal and the power of reclaiming the freedom to walk across *Diné Bikéyah*. Taphonso’s poem reflects the living memory of the Long Walk, the idea that, as Peter Iverson writes, “To the Navajo, the Long Walk happened last week” (qtd. in Bighorse). In her poem Taphonso remembers the still living stories of the Long Walk, and in so doing, she participates in the ongoing recollection and reclamation of history. She builds her poem through an accumulation of stories that reshape the linear structure of time, allowing past stories to have the immediacy of present experience. Through a collage of stories, movement across distance remains a central image. The land evokes stories filled with images of walking that bring together the physical journey of the Navajo with movement and migration in the Navajo tradition.

“In 1864” begins with the speaker and her daughter driving along the highway near Fort Sumner, New Mexico. As they drive they tell stories and the “stories and highway beneath / became a steady hum. The center lines were a blurred guide” (*Sáanii* 3-4). Taphonso creates a new way of moving; whereas the cadence in traditional Navajo chant may take on the rhythm of footfalls, here story takes on

the steadiness of a car whizzing down the highway. Though the agent of motion is changed, story and movement across the land remain intertwined.

The first story the speaker tells her daughter is a recent story, one that happened “a few winters ago” (6). In the part of eastern New Mexico that the speaker and her daughter are driving across, an electrician installing power lines looked out across the plains and noticed that “The land was like / he imagined from the old stories—flat and dotted with shrubs” (11-12). Left alone at the campsite one evening he “heard the cries and moans carried by the wind / and blowing snow. He heard the voices wavering and rising / in the darkness” (18-20). He understood that he was hearing the voices of his ancestors who were forced to *Hwééldi*; the land has absorbed their pain. He sang, “humming songs / he remembered from his childhood... He sang for himself, his family, and the people whose spirits / lingered on the plains, in the arroyos, and in the old windswept plants” (20-24). The electrician sought to balance the pain and anguish he heard in the voices on the plain through traditional Navajo songs. However, the pain of the Long Walk remained linked to the land and he decided that he must return to *Diné Bikéyah* to find balance: “The place contained the pain and cries of his relatives, / the confused and battered spirits of his own existence” (30-31). The electrician recognizes the lasting impact of the Long Walk; the horror and tragedy of the forced march to *Hwééldi* continue to reverberate in the very land the walkers crossed over. He is reminded of the importance of his own land, his own home.

At the end of the story of the electrician, the speaker and her daughter stop for “a Coke and chips” (32), and then resume their storytelling. The speaker begins the next story with the words of her aunt: “My aunt always started the story saying, ‘You are here / because of what happened to your great-grandmother long ago’” (33-34). By using her aunt’s opening, the speaker recalls the traditional openings of stories and ties the story, herself, and her daughter to their family history. Further, the line break after “You are here” emphasizes the connection of the story to the land by highlighting the reader’s place in *Diné Bikéyah*.

The bulk of the speaker’s story of the Long Walk centers on the journey itself. She emphasizes the distance they walked, the children they carried, and the fate of those who fell behind. Moreover, in her retelling she takes on the voice of her great-grandmother and tells the story in first person. “The journey began,” the speaker tells her daughter,

and the soldiers were all around us.
All of us walked, some carried babies. Little children and the elderly
stayed in the middle of the group. We walked steadily each day,
stopping only when the soldiers wanted to eat or rest.

We talked among ourselves and cried quietly.
We didn't know how far it was or even where we were going.
All that we knew for certain was that we were leaving Dinétah, our home.
...
We had such a long distance to cover.
Some old people fell behind, and they wouldn't let us go back to help them.
It was the saddest thing to see—my heart hurts so to remember that.
Two women were near the time of the births of their babies,
and they had a hard time keeping up with the rest.
Some army men pulled them behind a huge rock, and we screamed out loud
When we heard the gunshots.
(50-66)¹

The poem creates a sense of community and historical consciousness. The speaker tells the story of the Long Walk in the first person, making the events immediate and real. As she and her daughter drive along the same land, they relive the pain and fear of the Long Walk and time becomes irrelevant. Just as the center line of the highway blurs, so too does the line between past and present. The two journeys become one, though one is in a car in the late twentieth century and the other is on foot in the mid-nineteenth century. Even in the recitation of a story of cultural disruption Taphonso's poem insists on the strength and endurance of a people with a long history of walking. "We walked steadily," remembers the speaker (51).

The poem ends with a reaffirmation of the importance of story in the ongoing creation of Navajo culture and identity. The speaker remembers:

There were many who died on the way to *Hwééldi*. All the way
we told each other, "We will be strong as long as we are together."
I think that was what kept us alive. We believed in ourselves
and the old stories that the holy people had given us.
"This is why," she would say to us. "This is why we are here.
Because our grandparents prayed and grieved for us." (78-80)

The speaker ends the story by returning from her great-grandmother's voice to her aunt's voice. In her aunt's voice the speaker reminds her daughter of the importance of the story itself. Just as the walkers kept themselves alive through their belief in themselves and their stories, the speaker's aunt called on her, as the speaker calls on her own daughter, to continue to believe in the power of stories and in particular the power of the story of the Long Walk. Like the electrician who sings for himself, his family, and the voices of his ancestors, those same ancestors also return to story and song for strength and renewal. Through the rhythm of repetition, like the rhythm of footfalls, the stories provide communal coherence and suggest that even in the

face of adversity and pain the Navajo can draw upon their stories and the land itself to walk with agency and determination.

In addition to connecting to traditional homelands and reimagining the horrors of removal, contemporary American Indian poets also turn to images of walking to grapple with survival in the modern world. For example, in her poem “The Truth Is” Chickasaw poet and writer Linda Hogan draws on walking to navigate the complexities of mixed-blood identity. She brings together memories of removal and homeland with an image of walking a blurred and uncertain edge between her Chickasaw and Anglo identities. She writes that there is a Chickasaw hand in her left pocket and a white hand in her right pocket. “Don’t worry,” she tells the reader of the white hand, “It’s mine / and not some thief’s” (4-5). She draws attention here to the thievery implicit in Chickasaw/Anglo contact. The history of this contact is also the history of “who loved who/ and who killed who” (22-23). In her mixed identity the speaker embodies the history of the Chickasaw who lost their land, sometimes through love, but more often through thievery, dishonesty, and murder. She writes that the two parts of her do not live together peacefully, like branches grafted onto a fruit tree (13-14), but rather are “crowded together/and knock against each other at night” (17-18). “We want amnesty,” she asserts (20). Though she tries to dismiss this issue as “nonsense,” she tells herself:

Girl, I say,
it is dangerous to be a woman of two countries.
You’ve got your hands in the dark
of two empty pockets. Even though
you walk and whistle like you aren’t afraid
you know which pocket the enemy lives in
and you remember how to fight
so you better keep right on walking.
(31-38)

In this passage, walking becomes a method of survival. As “a woman of two countries,” the speaker walks to convince herself that she is not afraid of the ramifications of the struggle between lover and loved, between murderer and murdered that she identifies in her mixed-blood. Belonging to two countries also grants the speaker a certain mobility and fluidity. The two countries she walks through are etched with migration and removal trails, etched with the history of contact and conflict that her blood represents. At the end of the poem the speaker again tries to dismiss this inner conflict by refocusing her attention. She instructs herself:

Relax, there are other things to think about.
Shoes for instance.

Now those are the true masks of the soul.
The left shoe
and the right one with its white foot.
(43-47)

The speaker moves her attention from her hands, which she has identified as representations of her conflicted identity, to her shoes. Yet she finds that the problem of identity cannot be escaped because in her shoes lie a Chickasaw foot and a white foot. She ends the poem by stressing again the role of movement in survival and the creation of identity. The final image she leaves readers with is her two feet that carry her on her journey between the two countries and two identities she occupies.

That these three poems turn to images of walking for a site to express both cultural fragmentation and cultural continuance suggests the deep connection between imagination and mobility. As both material history and figurative image, walking serves as a site to explore the complex connections between place, story, and identity. Rose, Tapahonso, and Hogan claim walking as a site of cultural expression and reconstitution; in their poems walking is an act and an image that complicates our understanding of the sacredness of place and the power and vitality of cultural identity. ✱

Notes

¹In line 56, Tapahonso refers to “Dinetah,” the area “east of the center of the land between the [sacred Navajo] mountains” (Arthur et al., *Between Sacred Mountains* 4). Iverson calls Dinetah the “cradle of Navajo civilization, the place of Changing Woman’s birth... Although few Diné live in the area today, Dinetah remains a mecca to Navajos interested in their history and heritage” (20).

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