

Summary

“Towards an Alternative Poetics of Space: Intersections of the Feminine and the Environmental in Recent North American Indigenous Fiction in English”

This Ph.D. dissertation aims to explore the congruence of space, environment, and femininity as represented in twenty-first-century fiction written in English by Indigenous women writers from Canada and the United States. The project’s corpus consists of two Native American novels, namely Linda LeGarde Grover’s *The Road Back to Sweetgrass* (2014) and Louise Erdrich’s *The Night Watchman* (2020), as well as two novels authored by Indigenous Canadian women writers: Katherena Vermette’s *The Break* (2016) and Tracey Lindberg’s *Birdie* (2015). The thesis therefore offers a comparative reading that addresses similar, yet unique, settler colonial contexts. In the dissertation, I juxtapose the feminist (re)mappings emerging from the selected fiction with the colonial conceptualization of space, which allows to discern the literary means of contestation of settler normative geographies, as well as strategies employed to revitalize Indigenous spatialities.

I propose the following research hypotheses: (1) however different their scope and genre, all the selected narratives establish a crucial relationship between Indigenous women and the environment, which are both most vulnerable to colonial exploitation; (2) the selected Indigenous fiction, by exploring interlocking forms of oppression, provides an alternative to colonial mappings of space. The methodological underpinnings for the study of the motifs of space, femininity, and the environment in the selected writing are interdisciplinary and include such theoretical orientations as feminism, ecocriticism, and Indigenous studies. Moreover, I refer to historical and legal discourses concerning settler colonialism in North America, in particular their involvement with Indigenous land.

The dissertation is divided into three chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion. In the introduction, I construct the theoretical basis for the analysis of the selected fiction. I draw mainly from the current methods developed in the field of Indigenous studies that refer to the thematic addressed in this thesis. Following primarily Indigenous feminist thinkers, I outline the issues that affect the status of contemporary Indigenous women and their representation in settler discourses. I introduce the concept of *resurgence* that describes the process of restoring Indigenous knowledges, cultures, and histories, taking place on Indigenous terms, which is salient for the literary analysis conducted in the dissertation, as well as juxtapose it with the notion of reconciliation. Furthermore, I discuss theories and concepts connected to the Indigenous approach to land and the environment that stress ethics of care and reciprocity. These include Glen Coulthard's (Yelloknives Dene) notion of *grounded normativity*, Leanne Simpson's (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg) theorization of *land as pedagogy*, and Vanessa Watt's (Anishnaabe and Haudenosaunee) proposition of *Indigenous place-thought*. Another important aspect of contemporary Indigenous theory addressed in the introduction is the centrality of the concept of kinship in Native ontologies and its importance for the study of Indigenous spatial configurations.

Chapter One aims to provide a comprehensive historical and socio-cultural overview of the issue of space and settler colonialism in North America. I define the term settler colonialism and address different strategies of dispossession and displacement of Indigenous peoples it entails. Patrick Wolf's theoretical formulation of settler colonialism as a structure and Kyle Powys Whyte's (Potawatomi) concept of *settler inscriptions* serve as a starting point for the reflection on land politics in the U.S. and Canada. The reference to colonial precepts such as *manifest destiny*, *doctrine of discovery*, or *terra nullius* directs attention to the early colonial discourses applied to legitimize and legalize settler appropriation of Indigenous territories. Further, I discuss settler policies both in the U.S. and Canada that intended to

facilitate Indigenous displacement, dispossession, and assimilation. Pertaining to the contemporary issues troubling Indigenous communities in North America, the chapter also addresses settler colonial extractive economies that encroach on Indigenous traditional lands and exacerbate the condition of the natural environment, at the same time endangering Indigenous lifestyles and traditional practices. Throughout the chapter, the emphasis is placed on the correlation between strategies of land appropriation and the condition of Indigenous women. Thus, Chapter One functions as a necessary background for further analysis of the selected literary texts.

Chapter Two focuses on two novels written by Native American women writers, Linda LeGarde Grover (Chippewa) and Louise Erdrich (Chippewa). Both narratives can be classified as examples of historical fiction as they discuss the period of the relocation and termination policies in the United States and their aftermath for Indigenous communities, particularly women. In my analysis, I aim to demonstrate that Grover's and Erdrich's narratives negotiate the status of a reservation in the face of impending termination. The analysis also centers on the spatial marginalization of Indigenous women in the urban centers following their relocation. Thus, urban topographies emerge as precarious and marked by gendered violence in the narratives discussed in this chapter. My interpretation of the selected fiction foregrounds, however, the writers' strategies of resistance towards colonial structures and impositions that limit Indigenous sovereignty and access to ancestral land, as well as their literary means of (re)mapping, restor(y)ing, and reclaiming Native spaces.

Chapter Three offers a reading of two recent Canadian Indigenous novels—Katherena Vermette's (Métis) *The Break* and Tracey Lindberg's (Cree) *Birdie*. These literary texts focus on the cycles of intergenerational trauma following colonialism, which enable collateral violence in Indigenous communities that impacts women in particularly adverse ways. The analysis suggests that the patterns of recurring violence represented in the selected novels

reflect settler colonial spatial mechanisms of oppression, marginalization, and erasure. In my analysis, I focus on the traditional ways of overcoming trauma by female characters as represented by Lindberg and Vermette, which include the re-building of their relationship with the environment through land-based practices, especially ceremonies. Moreover, I emphasize the potential of these representations, which enable the restoration of kinship relationships, both with nature and people, in the Indigenous women's (re)mapping of colonial spaces that favor resurgence.

The conclusion offers a synthesis of the results obtained from the analysis of the selected fiction. Settler normative geography radically contrasts with the relational constructions of space as emerging from Indigenous women's writing. I address the ways in which the analyzed novels complicate the Western spatial orientations, for example, the one founded on the dichotomy between the city and the reservation. Further, the motif of home is discussed in terms of its transience in the selected narratives and the salience of its reconstruction through kinship relationships rather than as a physical location. I also highlight the crucial role of land-based practices and ceremonies located within the context of local ecosystems in the process of re-Indigenizing spaces by Indigenous women writers. Moreover, I locate the selected novels' engagement with the problem of the ubiquity of gendered violence against Indigenous women in relation to the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) crisis. I propose to read the fiction under discussion as MMIWG narratives that both commemorate Indigenous women erased by structural oppression and to approach the phenomenon of MMIWG as a cultural trauma. Finally, I offer tentative conclusions concerning the divergences in the poetics and politics of Canadian and American Indigenous fiction.

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