

Transgressing Liminality: Exploring the Latin American urban Self through Resistance and Remembrance in 21st century Americas

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Abstract

The paper explores the quest for identity through reception, resistance, and remembrance, as expressed in the *langscape* of 21st century Latin American poets. The paper also addresses the points of contact between the Latin American *Self* and the cultural *Other(s)* within the urban space, re-visiting the changing dynamics of the *Self -Other*, the *Global-local*, *centre-margin*, and so on. The oeuvres of contemporary Latin American poet Monica de la Torre and Indigenous womxn poets L. M. Silko and Joy Harjo is re-visited. The interface between the newly formed Latin America and the colonial *Other* is examined to trace the trajectory of oppression where the economically superior 'centre' continues to violate the cultural *Other* – the 'margin' – a threshold marked by a "no-exit" situation of socio-economic and cultural *Otherness*. The question of Indigenous identity in 21st century metropolis of the Americas is studied through the reading of selected works, narrating the complexities of identity-claim within the cityscape, and exploring transgression of the liminal space of "forced forgetting" where remembrance of one's *Self* (individual and/or communal) is transformed into an act of resistance.

Keywords

Liminality, memory, resistance, spatiality, Latin America, identity, cityscape.

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The absent monolith for 'Latin American' identity leads to the understanding of the different dialogic exchanges, interfaces, and processes of reception and resistance creating a certain *langscape*, or, "the language map of imagination" (di Michel 126). The ever-evolving dynamics within the Latin American literary *langscape* can be traced back to the early claims of a consolidated Latin American identity having their roots in the shared history of oppression etched in the collective memory of people inhabiting a particular space – finding expression through language. The quest for identity appears as a major socio-cultural, political and literary engagement, marking the *langscape* with reception, resistance, and remembrance. This paper locates this quest within the 21st-century cityscape where identity-claims encounter a homogenizing notion of imposed 'Universalism' in the age of globalization. The paper explores the contact between the Latin American *Self* and the cultural *Other(s)* within the urban space, re-visiting the changing dynamics of the *Self* and the *Other*, the *Global* and the *local*, the *centre* and the *margin*, and so on and so forth.

"The city is not a container where differences encounter each other; the city generates differences and assembles identities. The city is a difference machine insofar as it is understood as that space which is constituted by the dialogical encounter of groups formed and generated immanently in the process of taking up positions, orienting themselves for and against each other, inventing and assembling strategies and technologies, mobilising various forms of capital, and making claims to that space that is objectified as 'the city'" (Isin 283).

E. F. Isin further problematizes the idea of the cityscape and its relationship with the groups inhabiting the same in his article "City State: Critique of Scalar Thought," as he refers to the city as "a site of history" (Isin 223). The particular spatiality in discussion has been explored in nuanced terms of body politic (actual and virtual) – going beyond the restrictive notion of the actual cityscape. The identity claims and ways of belonging in the city-space are informed by *difference* and open to dialogical interactions and contestations. Dialogues around the question of identity within the cityscape deal with processes of structuring and restructuring of positions, hinting at possibilities of subversion; battling the all-encompassing notion of the *Global* in relation to the myriad individual and (/or) communal *local(s)* (Galeano 7). The processes of representing, restructuring and subverting identity-claims can be explored by looking at the oeuvres of contemporary Latin American poet Monica de la Torre and Indigenous woman poets L. M. Silko and Joy Harjo where each of them deals with the question of identity within the cityscape; and utterance of what is "remembered" appears as an act of resistance at the face of forced forgetting.

The phenomenon of formulating a homogeneous 'Global' identity, promoting cultural amnesia can be read along with Galeano's quasi-poetic account of the atrocities etched in the Latin American mindscape. His exploration of the question of agency within a hegemonic power-structure in *Open Veins of Latin America* enters the dialogue around the 'centre-margin' dynamics. Isabella Allende in her preface to the *Open Veins* comments on the critical and interpretive stance of Galeano's account which enables to cognize the question of

'Latin American' identity and of agency in more ways than one: "Open Veins of Latin America is an invitation to explore beyond the appearance of things. Great literary works like this one wake up consciousness, bring people together, interpret, explain, denounce, keep record, and provoke changes" (Allende 11).

Galeano marks the interface between the newly formed Latin America and the colonial *other*, only to follow the trajectory of oppression where the economically superior NorthAmerican 'centre' continues to violate the cultural *other* – the 'margin' – the liminal space, a threshold marked by a "no-exit" situation of socio-economic and cultural 'Otherness.'"

The inherent absurdity of the hegemonic framework since the early days of colonialism to the structuring of centre-margin dynamics at the age of globalization has been explored in Galeano's account. Taking cognisance of the contemporary urban scenario in cities marked by the phenomenon of 'globalization' it is crucial to note the changing dynamics of the *Self* and the (invisible) *Other*. In the literary oeuvres of Indigenous writers, an attempt to claim identity based on 'difference' is often palpable at the face of homogenising forces of globalization entitled to generate a universal notion of 'Global' entity. Like Galeano, Leslie Marmon Silko reflects on the early years of colonialism and interface of the Indigenous self and the colonial other to arrive at the question of agency within the contemporary urban socio-cultural framework. Resistance, here, stems from remembrance of a shared repertoire of tales that offer identity-claim within the cityscape. Every time the memory of the relationship between the Indigenous communities and the landscape is invoked within the contemporary space marked by 'otherization', it emerges as an act of resistance. It is through the invocation of the oral narratives shared by the community that individual and (/or) communal identity is claimed. The oral narratives belonging to the Hopi, Zuni, Acoma, and Laguna communities mention the relationship between the people and the 'Mother Creator', involving accounts of their understanding of nature, civilisation, agriculture, architecture, and comprehension of different natural phenomena. In *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today*, Leslie Marmon Silko speaks of this vast range of knowledge embedded in the collective memory of these communities through the presence of oral traditions involving the act of storytelling:

"In A.D. 1100 the people at Chaco Canyon had built cities with apartment buildings of stone five storeys high. Their sophistication as sky watchers was surpassed only by Mayan and Inca astronomers. Yet this vast complex of knowledge and belief, amassed for thousands of years, was never recorded in writing. (...) Instead, the ancient Pueblo people depended upon collective memory through successive generations to maintain and transmit an entire culture, a worldview complete with proven strategies of survival. The oral narrative, or story, became the medium through which the complex of Pueblo knowledge and belief was maintained" (Silko 30).

Silko embraces her Ka-waik identity and reflects on the points of interface with the colonial forces, taking cognisance of the dialogues and conflicts at the point of

contact. Silko mentions that the ancient Ka-waik worldview does not include the notion of private property as the community views the landscape as a part of “Mother Earth.” During the early years of contact with the European modes of analysis, the Ka-waik notion of “Mother Earth” faces the European idea of “nation” as the “Mother Land” involving the delimiting ideas of borders and nationalities. The question of identity, as understood by the coloniser, stems from the idea of nation where the geographical landscape could be delimited and defined in terms of borders through human agency.

On the other hand, identity of the indigenous communities residing in the Pueblo region has been intrinsically linked with the landscape, which according to the Ka-waik worldview belongs to their “Mother Creator” and is beyond the question of ownership (Silko 27). The period of contact between the two conflicting ideas vis-a-vis ‘identity’ was followed by years of ‘organised forgetting’, and attempts of homogenising and appropriating the Ka-waik consciousness devised by the forces of colonialism.

Leslie Marmon Silko looks back at the idea of collective memory in a dialogue with history as she notes – “through stories we hear who we are.” The relationship between the land and the people as expressed through the stories within the community suggests a possibility of resistance by involving memory against forgetting. A particular understanding of history evolving from the shared memory within the community, involving certain differences, conflicts, and contradictions, unfolds through the telling and re-telling of the stories:

“The ancient Pueblo people sought a communal truth, not an absolute truth. For them this truth lived somewhere within the web of differing versions, disputes over minor points, and outright contradictions tangling with old feuds and village rivalries” (Silko 32). When the idea of sharing the land with all the creations of the “Mother Creator” is revisited within the contemporary socio-political context, it in itself becomes an act of resistance questioning the history of marginalisation that the Indigenous communities have been subjected to at different points of time. Leslie Marmon Silko reflects on this very worldview in her poem “Lullaby” where the Ka-waik idea of being “together” with the earth, the sky, the wind and the rainbow is presented:

“The earth is your mother,
she holds you.
The sky is your father,
he protects you.

Sleep,
sleep.
Rainbow is your sister,
she loves you.
The winds are your brothers,
they sing to you.
(...)
We are together always
We are together always.”

It is this ‘spirit’ of the elements of nature, which, according to the Pueblo worldview influences the actions of individuals. The belief suggests how the individual choices, agencies, and the notion of identity are related to memory of narratives present in the collective consciousness. Silko’s use of certain thematic elements from the ancient Pueblo oral repertoire suggests reception of the oral traditions through re-telling, representation, and re-textualization.

The Pueblo narrative of the Kat’sina spirit residing in the mountains is revisited and appears to be central to the incidents narrated in Silko’s “Yellow Woman.” The story opens with the possibility of a fluid interaction between the inherited oral narratives and the reality that is portrayed. The contemporary understanding of the Pueblo identity stems from this interaction, a glimpse of which has been presented in the story. The story begins with a poem, directly referring to the stories of interaction between the protagonists and the forces of nature, addressing both the reader and the collective memory of the Pueblo community:

“What Whirlwind Man Told Kochininako, Yellow Woman:
I myself belong to the wind
and so it is we will travel swiftly
this whole world
with dust and with windstorms.”

The Pueblo woman recalls her memory of the “Yellow Woman” stories that she has inherited as a part of her identity. Here, the margins between the world of oral storytelling and that of the lived experiences gradually fade as the Pueblo woman thinks of her romantic encounter with Silva as the one narrated in the stories where the Yellow Woman is kidnapped by a spirit. This interface between the myth and the lived

experiences shapes the Indigenous identity and showcases the possibility of plurality vis-a-vis the question of identity opposed to the dominating discourses of imagining a uniform, homogeneous, global entity. Silko addresses this conflict and further problematises the notion of “identity” in her novel *Ceremony* where Tayo’s quest for identity within the contemporary socio-cultural context reflecting the discourses presented by “White America” marks a point of arrival at the question of identity for Indigenous communities at the age of globalization. The novel portrays Laguna Pueblo as a space for conflict, where the question of identity negotiates with both the past and the present. In the *Ceremony*, the past appears as the understanding of the way of life as inherited through orality and links the Pueblo identity with the land that they belong to. The novel criticises White America’s approach towards the land and the traditions that the Indigenous communities inherit. Tayo’s journey in *Ceremony* can be read along with Latin America’s quest for agency as explored in Galeano’s *Open Veins of Latin America* where remarks, “underdevelopment is not the lack of development but its effect” while critiquing the North American ‘centre’s’ capitalist socio-economic stance resulting in the continuation of the cycle of oppression.

Silko’s poetry, on the other hand, suggests defence against the violence of forced forgetting by remembering and retelling. The tension between the inherited traditions and the homogenising discourses marks the contemporary Pueblo identity, which is shaped into an act of resistance against the forces promoting erasure by invoking the memory of the ancient Pueblo creation myth in contemporary poetry. Silko’s poem “Ceremony” focuses on the idea of remembering the inherited stories that “cannot be confused or forgotten”, as a way of nurturing the Pueblo identity through memory against forced forgetting:

“I will tell you something about stories,
[he said]
They aren't just entertainment.
Don't be fooled.
They're all we have, you see.
All we have to fight off illness and death.
You don't have anything
if you don't have the stories.
Their evil is mighty,

but it can't stand up to our stories.
So they try to destroy the stories,
but the stories cannot be confused or forgotten.
They would like that.
They would be happy
because we would be defenceless then.”

Here, remembering almost appears as an act of resistance, as a tool to understand, reshape, and “defend” the Pueblo identity. Composed in English, Silko’s poems retain the Indigenous names for certain ideas which together with the understanding of the Laguna landscape and the oral traditions shapes the *langscape* for the contemporary Pueblo writer. Writing from a contemporary urban space of the Americas, Latin American Indigenous poets explore the idea of collective memory to arrive at an understanding of shared history. Dana Barblec explores the ways in which the Indigenous citizens “understand their indigeneity as urban dwellers” and questions the invisibility of urban Indigeneity in mainstream research and practice in her article titled “Who Counts as an Authentic Indigenous?” Collective Identity Negotiations in the Chilean Urban Context” (Barblec, 1). The question of ‘authentic Indigeneity’ is problematized, addressing the inevitability of construction and reconstruction of identity claims following interaction, contact, and contestations in the urban space. Dana Barblec focuses on the necessity to understand “ethnic identities as fluid, leading individuals to consider the milieu beyond its physical dimension, usually accompanied by different forms of cultural representation. Therefore, new environments, such as the urban one, can acquire symbolic meaning upon which Indigenous peoples can construct and reconstruct identity.” (Barblec 2). The role of memory is integral to the processes of re-telling and reconstructing Indigenous identity claims within the urban spaces. Joy Harjo’s poems dealing with the recurrent thematic concern of positing an identity claim through the invocation of the collective memory of the community can be thought of in this regard:

“Remember you are all people and all people
are you.
Remember you are this universe and this
universe is you.
Remember all is in motion, is growing, is you.

Remember language comes from this.

Remember the dance language is, that life is.

Remember.”

Joy Harjo’s quest and claims for identity are linked to the idea of a community, where ‘language’ becomes synonymous to ‘life.’ Writing in English, Harjo also explores the possibility of de-colonising the coloniser’s language, which in spite of being internalised in more ways than one, is, to quote Joyce, “his (coloniser’s) before mine.” The idea of “Reinventing” in “the colonizer’s tongue and turning those images around to mirror an image of the colonized to the colonizers as a process of decolonization” as Bird points out while commenting on Indigenous writings in North America, “indicates that something is happening; something is emerging and coming into focus that will politicize as well as transform literary expression” (Bird 11). Harjo’s poetry transgresses the barriers associated with language by using it as a tool to reach out to her readership, presenting the idea of resistance by subverting the power positions central to the politics of representation vis-a-vis language. Harjo claims, “poetry uses language despite the confines of language, be it the oppressor’s language or any language.” Her poems comment on the dislocation of Indigenous communities, transition of ways of living and the gradual oblivion engulfing memory, both individual and communal. In “Re-inventing the Enemy’s Intentions: Native Identity and the City in the Poetry of Joy Harjo,” J. M. Carnes unpacks the absurdity of the American cityscape’s apparent homogeneity and inclusivity which time and again *otherizes* the Indigenous and Latin American population. From marginalising the cultural *other* since the early years of promising to promote heterogeneity to the contemporary racial discriminations faced by citizens of colour (including members of the Asian Diasporas), the American urban space has been marked by a particular centre-margin relationship. The pre-existing phenomena of *otherization* under the influence of globalization assumes a different form promoting cultural amnesia of a certain degree, where the cultures located at the “*margin*” faces the idea of a new “*global*” which in turn promotes and represents the *centre*. Harjo’s “Map to the other world” takes cognisance of the forces of forgetting at work within the urban space and suggests ways of resistance by transgressing the space that delimits memory and denies agency:

“In the legend are instructions on the language of the land, how it
was we forgot to acknowledge the gift, as if we were not in it or of it.

Take note of the proliferation of supermarkets and malls, the
altars of money. They best describe the detour from grace.
Keep track of the errors of our forgetfulness; the fog steals our
children while we sleep (...)
What I am telling you is real and is printed in a warning on the
map. Our forgetfulness stalks us, walks the earth behind us, leaving
a trail of paper diapers, needles, and wasted blood.
An imperfect map will have to do, little one.
The place of entry is the sea of your mother's blood, your father's
small death as he longs to know himself in another.
There is no exit."

Joy Harjo's warning against "forgetting" leading to a space of no-exit culminates in transgression, through the possibility of envisaging a new map; a possibility that can only be cognised through remembering the shared past: "Remember the hole of shame marking the act of abandoning our tribal grounds."

Dorfman and Mattelart critique the depiction of a limited, disconnected, pastoral space in the Disney comics in *How to Read Donald Duck*. They note that such depiction when received by Latin American readership might also mean denying access to the world beyond and denying agency to act and resist the forces of cultural amnesia. Such depiction can be understood vis-a-vis the capitalist socio-economic framework. This context can be addressed through the reading of Harjo's claim of agency beyond the space granted by the power-structure. Eduardo Galeano would refer to this infantilization of the cultural *other* to a certain degree by delimiting agency and access to certain spaces of society as he speaks of "a system made impotent by its function of international servitude." However, it is crucial to note that the "Neo-Imperialism" of North America carried out through control over market-economy involves moments of deliberate "de-Americanization" within the processes of "Americanization." The *centre*, projected as the *Global*, involves elements of the *local(s)* located at the margin. *Glocalization* involves the homogenisation of identities at the 'margin' through the Disney comics and the Coca-Cola, through "McDonald's berry-based drink in Brazil, a fruit-based shake in Malaysia, vegetarian Maharaja Macs in India ..." (El-Din Aysha 285). In this context, the urban Latin American *Self* can be observed in relation to the forces of *globalization* (and

‘*glocalization*’); exploring the possibilities of resistance against the homogenising forces through language.

Monica de la Torre, the contemporary Latin American poet, critiques the delimiting aspects of the urban space as a part of the capitalist socio-economic framework. Her poems dealing with identity within the contemporary cityscape observe and comment on the “no-exit-ness” inherent to such hegemonic structures, transgressing the same in the process. de la Torre’s poetry can be placed at a point of departure from the pre-existing modes of identity claims at the margin. She questions the socio-cultural structure that associates “identity claim” with the members of the *otherised* communities. The Spanish last name becomes a halo around which assumptions are posited within the apparently inclusive cityscape. The creation and (/or) expression of a particular urban *landscape* depicting the question of identity in de la Torre’s *Public Domain* can be revisited in this regard. Her poems ask what it means to be “Latin American” in a way that both formulates and deconstructs the questions integral to identity. In her poem “Doubles” she enters the discourse around identity structured and nurtured in the urban space by exploring the processes of *otherization* inherent in the act of naming.

“While all the Monica de la Torre have some relation to Spanish speaking cultures, their overt demographic differences exemplify how a name might stand for certain false expectations of, or sense of unity amongst, those with the same designation” (Alcala 9).

However, in this critique of the “other” at the *centre*, de la Torre does arrive at a certain kind of identity claim, both as an individual and as a member of a community. de la Torre’s “Divagar” can be read as an act of resistance that arrives at the idea of “demolishing” the construct that constantly *otherises* the Latin American *Self* through expression, developing and “using” a certain urban *landscape* to resist and transgress marginalisation:

“If I were an instrument. A bassoon. In the source
language
we don’t say “spread the word.” *Pasa la voz* is our idiom, easily
mistaken for a fleeting voice.
How fitting a last name
like halo (...)
That’s when I decide to stop fighting the city. Use it in
my

favor. Speak to strangers. Demolish the construct in the performance.”

Conclusion

Through the reading of contemporary Latin American poetry unpacking different aspects of the layered urban space of 21st century Americas, the interface between the *Self* and the amorphous *other* in the context of globalization, can be explored. An enquiry of the oppressor-oppressed relationship is crucial to the understanding of the changing dynamics of the *self* and the *other* within the cityscape where the nature of oppression, though varying in degree, remains unchanged in more ways than one. Paulo Freire’s analysis of the machinations of oppression within hegemonic structures in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* suggests an insight into contemporary American urban spaces where Latin American and (/or) Indigenous identities encounter the oppressive forces of forced amnesia. However, it is crucial to note how the voices of dissent critique and subvert the homogenising wave of a certain “universalism” by holding on to ‘difference’ and reclaiming identity through memory. The poetry of contemporary woman poets writing in and from the urban spaces of 21st century Americas, presents myriad ways in which dissent shapes itself as opposed to layered marginalisation. Identity as individuals, as women writers, as “Latin Americans,” as Indigenous citizens, and so and so forth suggest a *landscape* marked by countless interfaces, conflicts, and most importantly, a plethora of continuous dialogues. It is in such urban spaces where the voices of dissent express the quest for a certain kind of assimilation based on the acknowledgement of identity claims. The remembrance of “who we are,” as Silko points out, in itself becomes an act of resistance; where questions of identity and agency are framed by transgressing the barriers inherent to the *centre-margin* discourse. The cityscape, thus, appears as a space marked by possibilities where transgression can be formulated through language as Harjo expresses the necessity of such crossing of borders through demanding the agency to make one’s own map:

“Crucial to finding the way is this: there is no beginning or end.
You must make your own map.”

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