Notes toward a Native Feminism’s Spatial Practice

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Why is it that settlement or place is so frequently characterized as bounded, as enclosure, and as directly counterposed to spaces as flows?

—Doreen Massey, Space, Place, and Gender

The physical is easier to achieve a boundary drawn to separate people Navajos say no word exists establishing form to the air we breathe.

—Esther Belin, “On Relocation”

The politics of place in Native American studies is very tricky both socially and politically. While conceptions of Native identity are legislated differently depending on governing nation-states, tribal government systems, histories, and cultural differences, they share spatialized tendencies, identity, social relations, and politics are often conceived,
represented, and determined as geographically and historically situated and bound to a particular community. This grounding, even while considered abject space by the settler state, is of utmost importance to the imaginative geographies that create the material consequences of everyday existence for Native people, even while the historical onslaught of legislation continues to rip that grounding out from under Native people. In contemporary politics—and over the last two hundred years—Native communities have been depicted and conceived as transitory, dying communities, despite the reality of vitality and strength of Native people who refuse to give up ground to the forces of settler-colonialism. Yet, in order not to cede the ground, we must also begin to scrutinize the impact of spatial policies in our cognitive mapping of Native lands and bodies. Beyond examining the discursive frameworks located in specific historical, political, and cultural moments, we must also think critically about “sets of choices, omissions, uncertainties, and intentions” that are “critical to, yet obscured within” the mapping of the body polity and nation-state.1 How do we uproot settler maps that drive our everyday materiality and realities?

During the post–Great Wars era, a heightened sense of nationalism seized the geopolitical imagination of American citizens, resulting in federal Indian policy based on creating a unified political citizenry and political map. Western masculine progress, rooted in the patriarchy of military and legal conquest, defined state practices; its counterpart of feminine progress, derived from Christian morality, came to define national cultural practices symbolically entrenched in the home. Narratives of progress provide the underpinnings for these settler policies. Progress became the mantra for a budding U.S. nation-state and a term evoking American rugged individualism: exemplified by a raw masculinity, reckless bravery, “rational” ingenuity, domination, and ambition.2 Although established in the nineteenth century, the language of conquest continues to be rooted in these gendered and racialized ideals. Having supposedly domesticated the “Indian” and in doing so firmly cutting its ties with Europe, the settler government of the United States heightened its nationalistic efforts in the Great Wars to become a world power. Yet its look outward belied the mass spatial reconfiguring taking place internally with Native nations who were experiencing the threat of Termination and Relocation.

I focus on the material practices at work in the Relocation program, as it is critiqued in Esther Belin’s (Diné) book of poetry From the Belly of My Beauty as an example of the way we mentally and unconsciously react and negotiate with imposed colonial spatial ideology. In this collection, Belin, “blues-ing on the brown vibe” of the urban landscape of Los Angeles and Oakland, California, collects snapshots of the urban Indian community in these major relocation centers, memories of Dinétah, and instances of the routes that take her back and forth both physically and mentally. It works as a potential site for a critique of
dominant spatial norms of fixity of Native people in time and space and allows for a potential spatial restructurings. Donna Landry and Gerald Maclean make clear that material feminism "takes the critical investigation, or reading, in the strong sense, of the artifacts of culture and social history, including literary and artistic texts, archival documents, and works of theory, to be a potential site of political contestation through critique." Belin's poetry is an example of Native women writers presenting space and time as a matter of narrated relationships constructed not only as a critique of colonial orderings, but also one embedded in Native epistemologies and narrations that envision the future. It makes visible omissions in the settler-map, points out the intentions of the state, and relishes in the uncertainties that Termination and Relocation produced. Belin's work provides us with a meaningful opportunity to focus on the material practices involved in the process of a federal program aimed at spatial separation from tribal communities and incorporation into the nation state—both physically and mentally.

The physical boundaries Belin speaks of in the epigraph are drawn through legislation, social policy, and public narration of Indians' "place" in nation-state narratives. Belin addresses these statist visions of place through the reinterpretation of Diné stories and philosophies. She exercises a spatial practice to address bounded space and bodies constructed during colonialism and the rise of a U.S. nation-state to global power. By understanding that space is produced and productive, which Belin makes clear in her writing, we unbury the generative roots of spatial colonization and lay bare its concealed systems. Belin's poetry demonstrates the effect of the children born off reservation and into this spatial upheaval marked by post–World War II Indian politics that pushed for incorporation into American culture and economics at the expense of tribal cultures and treaty made land bases. More importantly, her poetry attempts to mediate the material conditions that these migration policies produced. The reorganizing and ordering of space in the forms of nation-state, reservations, ghettos, barrios, counties, and other geopolitical organizing are necessary to the inner workings of colonialism. This era is vital to understanding the generative roots of the Rez/Off-Rez dichotomy, its impact on Native communities, and its replications in ongoing federal Indian policy in the United States.

GENDERING RELOCATION

Esther Belin questions place, identity, and community relationships through her poetic deconstruction of the federal Indian policies of Termination and Relocation. U.S.-implemented Relocation policies moved Native people off reservations and into cities such as Chicago, Detroit, Minneapolis, Los Angeles, and Oakland, California. Newspapers, pamphlets, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs used the common rhetoric...
of “progress,” “modernizing,” and helping Indians to become “part of American society” to convince Natives and non-natives that this was the key to survival. Reservation economics encouraged participation in the program. This began a large migration back and forth to cities and today we find 60 percent of the Native population living in urban centers, according to the 2000 census. Consequences of imposed spatial ideologies reverberate for generations and produce a myriad of ongoing spatial relations, as they have since first contact.

In an autobiographical essay, Belin articulates these goals while pinpointing her individual story of parents who first attended the Sherman Institute in Riverside, California, and then were relocated to the Los Angeles area: “Goal: annihilation of savage tendencies characteristic of indigenous people. New language. New clothes. New food. New identity. Learn to use a washing machine. Learn to silence your native tongue, voice, being. Learn to use condiments without getting sick. Learn a trade and domestic servitude. Learn new ways to survive.”

Although migration to Los Angeles began in the early 1920s, the population of American Indians living in Los Angeles was estimated to have increased dramatically, from 6,000 to 12,405, between 1950 and 1955. Like many of those relocating to Los Angeles and other cities, her parents’ education worked in tandem with the policies of job placement in the city. She rightly connects the assimilation policies of boarding schools and Relocation; these civilization policies were both intended to integrate Native people into American society and create a workforce for the nation. Boarding schools attempted to educate and discipline the body, while Relocation attempted to separate bodies from place. Within the process of respatializing the Native body, men and women underwent a gendering process, which also pulled them away from culturally significant ways of relating to the land and community.

Once forcibly confined to reservations or eradicated completely from their lands, Native peoples were now being coerced into controlled migrating movements. Men were to become hourly workers in urban spaces, or “WORKING MEN, IN PROGRESS,” as Belin illuminates in her poem “On Relocation.” She closely links relocation to earlier notions of Manifest Destiny and the legacy of narrating imperial space by visually capitalizing, as if in a road sign, the above words and depicting the idea of progress and movement through italicization. Like a road sign, Relocation policy was meant to direct and regulate Native existence. Belin confronts Western notions of gendered labor and land through capitalization. “WORKING MEN” implies ongoing construction that has a tangible result. Within this signage, which also serves as a warning, Belin explores the gender dimensions of a “progressive” labor force American style. Women, whose role as farmers and herders was eroded by federal Indian policy, could gain employment in the city as domestic workers and, more
rarely, as low-paid factory workers. In Belin’s poetry, the reoccurring juxtaposition of strong Diné women who give her strength and white women who enact power and privilege in detrimental ways illuminates the racial and gender hierarchies at the foundation of assimilation policies. In fact, the poems that focus on the relationship of gendered and racialized labor in white households are tinged with a bitter tone of betrayal and anger. Relocation was not only about a movement of bodies off reservation, but also about respatializing a consciousness and relationship to land or mapping space as settler places.

Women’s roles as caregivers put more pressure on them to become more like white women or “to cook roast beef not mutton/to eat white bread not fry bread/to start a family not an education/to be happy servants to doctors’ families in Sierra Madre/then to their own.”

The impossibility of enjoying the economic position of white women and racial inequities resulted in roles for Native women as domestic servants and caregivers to others’ children. The placement of women in the “private” sector of the home obscured Native women’s contributions. Feminist geographers have broken down the dichotomy of public/private and assert that the public often constructs the politics found in the private sphere of the home. The home, in fact, becomes an interior colonial sphere and the relationship between subjects is highly regulated. Within the category of domestic workers, Native women were placed into a colonial map comprised of exterior gender and racial norms. The policy of boarding schools and Relocation and its effect on Native women and their communities definitely support this, as federal Indian policy made possible domestic labor and exploitation. More policing of Native women’s relationships also mounted, on and off the Rez, as the pressures and resistance to assimilation increased.

Motherhood and home became sites of angst in the face of many responsibilities outside the home, in the community, and with extended family (which is a summarization of the various roles Native women are still responsible to fulfill). Public Law 280 increased the threat against Native women by giving some states the option and others, such as California, the responsibility of regulating judicial systems over Native Nations while decreasing federal Indian programs. Violence became the means of restricting the mobility of Native women, making border towns dangerous as the likelihood of non-protection existed. This Law was to have devastating consequences on the ability of tribes to regulate resource exploitations and criminal acts. States were to be part of the apparatus of erasing tribes from national landscape and these laws would exert a physical and cultural violence through spatial control.

Belin’s poems address the power relations at work in these devastating colonial categories. Notice the repetitive use of “and” in the poem, which not only forms a driven rhythm but also emphasizes the
multiple roles Native women play in the urban environments and the ways they work through changing labor practices:

Instead of fasting and sweating and praying and running
They set the table and vacuumed and ironed and nursed and fed

They were strong and loved and made love and sobered up
and organized weekend road trips back to the rez
Back to the rez where we all came from
and where we need to return
to heal our wounds
from the Euro-American womanhood ceremony.

The split between Rez communities that was the aim of Relocation policies did not account for mobility or a community’s ability to take care of each other. Even though policies have greatly impacted Native women’s experiences, Belin also suggests that Native women provide the key to healing, even as they need to experience healing as well. Healing is not linked to returning to the original, but returning to a specific land; the Rez she refers to is not stagnant and city places are not assimilative. She wrestles with the imposed colonial classifications of space and ‘real’ Indians simultaneously, and by doing so exposes the fluctuation and false premise of the categories in the first place.

Engendering men and women in the image of the imperial family was of utmost importance in claiming and reordering Native spaces. Women were to “mimic the rituals of Euro-American women,” “who never really became women because they/were taken off the Rez before they could go through a womanhood/ceremony.”12 “Mimic” is a carefully chosen word that withstands the socialization of Native women into the image of “Euro-American Womanhood”; it implies imitation of this form of womanhood and not assimilation. She reinforces the mimicking by incorporating Dine specific cultural and gendered imagery that is rich in meanings of body and place. Specifically, in later poems, she makes reference to participation in the Diné womanhood ceremony, the Kinaaldá, which brings a Navajo woman into a fully realized woman in the community. Even though Belin “stumble[s] at [her] shadow raised by Los Angeles skyscrapers,” she still has not been erased and recognizes the “ironic immigration” of the multitude of Native people living in Los Angeles. While the alliteration of “ironic immigration” causes pause, the meaning also causes a pause and questions the notion of the borders of the settler state. In recognizing all land in the United States as belonging to Native Nations, she describes Relocation as movement
that reflects "more accurate[ly] tribal nation to tribal nation." The conceptual fixity of immigration, settler status, and the spatial split between Natives on and off reservation forced through the legalities of relocation, termination, and Law 280 are exposed as a lexicon of continued empire building.

Many Native peoples as a result of Relocation resituated their relationship to their communities and each other in places where lands are not defined or named by the state as "Indian." In the urban centers, however, connections between home and the city changed and new connections formed. Susan Lobo argues, in her essay "Urban Clanmothers," that the loss of extended family one would have on the reservation was replaced by an extended network of friends and even distant relatives throughout the Relocation site of the Bay Area in Northern California; these networks, she argues, are facilitated by women who, in fact, act as clanmothers. Inevitably, Native people gather in what Renya Ramirez refers to as Native Hubs, or places "of mobility both in urban and reservation settings, a mechanism to support Native notions of culture, community, identity, and belonging as well as a political vision for social change." Often, it was necessary for women to practice gendered relations outside the cultural forms learned from their mothers, aunts, and grandmothers. These practices of relating to each other were not "outdated" in the city, but instead the elements of these practices that persisted were and continue to be vital to Native navigations in urban centers. In many ways, the lack of the dominant culture’s understanding of Native peoples’ capacity to reach out to others beyond their specific Tribal Nation was a major flaw in the goals of Relocation policy. In fact, the propensity for sharing where one is from and learning to live with each other comes from thousands of years of experience living on this continent together—it is as instinctive as breathing.

"WE ARE CUT OFF FROM EACH OTHER": BREATHING LIFE INTO COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS

In “On Relocation,” Belin recounts Navajo epistemologies and philosophy in her ending lines: “Navajos say no word exists/establishing form to the air we breathe.” The intergenerational philosophy of breath employed in the poem connects all living entities to each other as relatives. She actively juxtaposes “word” and “air we breathe” in individual lines to emphasize the power of reconfiguring spatial and gendered relationships through speech and prayer. By connecting speech, language, and breath as “a sacred act through which the individual participates in an ongoing relationship with all other living beings,” she defies spatial policies set in place to dislocate Diné relationships to each other, destroy a gendered sense of place, and dissolve
the Diné and urban Indian community. This act of breath, which is necessary to life, leads to speech. As one scholar writes: “After their emergence onto the earth’s surface, wind and inner forms were placed within all living things as a source of life, movement, speech, and behavior. Rather than being an independent spiritual agency that resides within the individual, like the Western notion of the soul, Holy Wind is a single entity that exists everywhere and in which all living beings participate…. The act of breathing is a sacred act through which the individual participates in an ongoing relationship with all other living beings.” Remembering the act of breathing enables Belin and her readers to imagine past the dislocations of urban migration.

In the act of speaking, Belin is articulating a history of connection and mediating the impact of colonial spatial restructuring in order to recuperate vibrant communities that veer from destructive patriarchal colonial patterns of conceiving of space “as a boundary drawn to separate people” on the basis and interstices of race, nation, and gender. The act of breath, inhaling, exhaling, smoking, and speaking reverberate through this collection of urban poems and at particularly difficult times experienced by urban Indian women. Belin’s use of tobacco throughout her poems emphasizes connection, prayer, and the making of urban Indian communities, whether it is in the imagery of the newly arrived trickster figure, Coyote, offering up a smoke to a Ponca and Seminole or “good thoughts” offered for the “bold/and brown/and beautiful” Miss Celine, who “is signaling the spirits to gather around/As she inhales” but “forgets about the spirits” who “are waiting for her to speak/As she exhales.” The capitalization of “As” accentuates the action taken by the author and a specific Diné belief to make connections to other Native people across lines of difference or in places marked by colonialism as non-native. Belin was brought up in a vibrant Los Angeles Native community solidified as such by crossing these lines of difference.

Belin connects settler-colonial history to the policies that have affected her life and works to resituate them by incorporating philosophies of Navajo place making in her critique of Western spatial practices. In the second stanza of the poem “On Relocation,” Belin personifies the narrative of colonial restructuring:

This country’s stem
relocation
rooted for invasion
imperial in destiny.

The play between “rooted” and “stem” refigures colonization as a growing entity. Belin establishes the link between displacement of Native people from their lands and America’s growth as an imperial force and nation-state in the slippage of the word “relocation,” which refers to the
first Relocation of Europeans to North America as well as the Relocation of Native people in the twentieth century. Furthermore, in her third stanza, she continues to reiterate the narrative of progress implicated in the line of “imperial in destiny” to draw out its gendered implications. Through the use of italics, punctuation, capitalization, and placement of words, Belin draws the eye toward the center of the poem:

**WORKING, MEN**
**IN PROGRESS**

The present tense of the construction “in progress” reminds the reader of the ongoing effects of colonization and imperialism. Concepts of progress, the development of Indian land into urban landscapes, Indian bodies into urban work forces, and the gendered dynamics are drawn together in the very middle of the poem, exposing the continuation of spatial narrations of nation-state destiny.

The net effect of such restructuring of Native communities and gendered practices comprise the next stanza, in which Relocation produces an ongoing effect. The impact of spatial restructuring on subsequent generations becomes evident in the adjectives that emphasize the body:

Stand and wait for crossblood babies
generic cultures blending new versions
of red nations
brain-dead at birth from pollution ingested
umbilical cord of sweet grain alcohol
and sticky TV diaries.

It is important to note that Belin chooses the word “crossblood,” rather than refer to relocated Native peoples as mixed-bloods or completely alienated. The word “crossblood” originates with Gerald Vizenor, known for his play with language and critique of what he calls “terminal Creeds,” or those who have an essentialized notion of an Indian stemming from anthropology or popular culture. I, too, am concerned by these essentialist constructions, but most importantly I am concerned with the boxes of our own making that occur as we deal with a political and legal system meant to support settler-colonialism. “Crossbloods,” unlike terminal creeds, are not fixed by representations of the real Indian comprised of proper bodies, such as blood quantum, in proper places, such as a Rez Indian. As David Murray reminds us, crossbloods are a category that escapes spatial and temporal fixations and Vizenor makes the reservation a crossblood space. By using Vizenor’s language, Belin pointedly marks the way Relocation becomes a mechanism to put in place further representations of the “real” in the Rez/urban dichotomy, as well as addressing social problems.
The poetry, like the crossblood, is a potential language site rather than an exploration of the tragically dislocated generic Indian or tragic mixed-blood. The possibility, indetermination, and agency in the construction of crossbloods in Belin’s poems link representations of the “real Indian” it produces to spatial constraints and meanings produced by dominant society. The verbs in the above stanza (“stand,” “wait,” “ingesting,” “blending”) call for action versus complacency. The poetic language considers the historic process of colonization and contemporary reality of the political situation for Native peoples, rather than relying on simplistic and generic notions of Indianess constructed by dominant society. Belin uses the form of question to reveal the supposition of what it means to be relocated by linking early colonialism to her current status as a Diné “relocated at birth” in her last stanza: “WHO IS TO SAY?/ crossblood babies/relocated at birth.” Belin’s continued moment of dislocation calls into question the inner workings of spatial colonization by creating a visual link in the poem between the lines “WORKING, MEN/IN PROGRESS” and “WHO IS TO SAY.” The bold visual of the capitalized first sentence in the stanza not only defies the authority of the state to name, but also challenges other Navajos to consider the importance of Navajo philosophies of speech and breath as more powerful than “imperial” “destiny.” The connections made through breath withstand the imperial project of assimilation; the power of words to define these connections is important to consider in the struggle for decolonization. As Belin demonstrates, the production of space for Native people is greatly affected by expanding capitalism that requires the restructuring of Native lands, relationship, and bodies.

In the decolonization of space it is necessary to address the gendered sets of spatial practices, such as that of the work force created in Relocation, in order to create communities that will make change. The question quickly becomes, how do we find the routes, which connect us? Floria Forcia, a participant in the American Indian Chicago Oral History project, when asked, “Do you go back to the reservation and take part in anything or are you completely cut off from your reservation?” profoundly replies, “We’re completely cut off from each other.” Yet, Forcia at the time of this interview, became important to the Chicago community, akin to one of the “urban clanmothers” that Lobo’s work speaks to. The connections between Indians in urban communities occur because of spoken connections and the seeking out of tribal hubs in urban centers. This echoes Belin’s reframing of Western notions of physical barriers of dislocation and questioning of the ways that Relocation draws boundaries. The detriments of spatial reconstruction embedded in Relocation are exemplified in the poem and this moment. It is not just the individual that feels displacement, but also the community, who has lost a connection and it is for this
reason that we must unmap settler spaces and find new ways to (re)map our communities.

Let’s conclude by returning to breath and the start of the Relocation poem as well as this paper. Belin’s poetic words in the epigraph play against Massey’s statement on place in meaningful ways: she not only answers Massey’s question of why place is characterized as bounded, but also elaborates from the perspective of a woman who has experienced reterritorialization: colonial bounding and renaming of land, bodies, and communities. Through imposed spatial ideologies and their narration in popular culture, land and people become seemingly bound and fit into tight containers, in this case the reservation. The danger of identities fixed in time and space is well known to Native people—what becomes elided in the colonial political bind are the histories of movement and mobility of people and ideas.

While Massey argues for a conception of place as flow, which for her refers to more than the unrestricted global movement of capital through stagnant place, but also to the permeability of place as a “meeting place” of cultures and people, Belin also delicately longs for a non-reactionary place or one not inscribed by the state. She longs for a place that is historically rooted, claims her, and connects her to the Diné nation even while she is located in the urban center of Los Angeles or Oakland. Yet, unlike Massey, Belin’s geographical affiliations are not an accidental coming together, nor are they wholly voluntary. They also have material effects as her identity as a Native American woman is regulated by the nation-state. Reconciling a history of settler-colonialism in discussions of place, migrations, and economies must take place, whether it is the grazing plains of the Midwest or the city of New York. Belin’s “expression is a liberation” that recognizes a Diné sense of place as a cohesive one, not made through legal boundaries, but through communal, clan, and individual stories. This Native spatial practice is as much about the future as the past.

FINDING THE COMPASS, (RE)MAPPING LANDSCAPES

“Let’s begin with the first thing you remember,” Belin writes in her poem “Directional Memory,” which is organized in four sections that correlate to the cardinal directions and sacred mountains of the Diné. The structure of the poem also refers to the sacred wind briefly addressed in the conversation regarding breath; this wind gave life to First Man and First Woman that flowed from the east and the west and the mountains that mark the four directions and, as Clara Sue Kidwell and Alan Velie write, “Wind is [considered] the breath of the universe.” The section begins in the west, moves to the north, then south, and ends in the east, each reflecting on a particular memory in Belin’s development as a
woman. Through poetic articulation, recalling of memories, reference to Diné culturally specific stories and the correlating four directions, Belin mediates the impact of colonial spatial restructuring. Rather than “place” herself within bounded “state lines,” she uses her memory and Diné maps to reposition herself in relation to L.A., the Diné community, and the United States.

By arranging the poem in the cardinal directions, Belin also is recalling the four mountains that mark Diné land: Tsisnaajini (Blanca Peak in the east), Tsoodzil (Mt. Taylor in the south), Dok’oslíd (San Francisco Peak in the west), and Dibénitsaa (La Plata in the north).30 Kelly and Francis articulate the importance of geography to Navajo subjectivity:

Navajo geography recognizes the same four cardinal directions as do European-derived geographies, but east is the direction Navajos emphasize. . . . Navajo children in their cognitive development thereby become oriented to geographical space as soon as they become aware of the order in all dwellings. The Navajo creation stories describe the entire pre-conquest homeland as a hogan, with a scared mountain in each of the four directions compared to a pole in the hogan’s framework. So ingrained is this sense of geography that Navajos raised in the old ways will organize just about any domain of knowledge, even abstract or non-geographical or non-Navajo things, by associating the various components of the domain in four directions.31

Belin’s poem raises the question of “organization of knowledge” of a relocated Navajo and the question of individual memories and belonging. As the poem moves in all four directions, so does Belin’s consciousness about the landscape, place, and self. We progress from her inability as a child to speak of a simple loss of a sandal—“Specific memory of wanting to go back and get the shoe and in your/head you even telepathically announce to everyone that you left your/shoe at the old home”—to her ability to speak to the many losses, both personal and those of the “native brothers and sisters of this tropical climate,” that have occurred from colonial spatial restructuring.12 Individual memory and communal memory are tied to place in this instance and throughout the memories she ties to the four cardinal directions.

Clearly, Belin values and implements Navajo-derived geographies even if she is not raised within the boundaries of the sacred mountains. It is the map handed down through her grandparents, one tying together places, stories, and generations, which enables her to incorporate
the non-Navajo and Navajo things that make up her existence. In the “North” stanza she relates these experiences:

kissing me with your red lips
blessing me with your diva-ness
shiny black hair dances at Mr. Fives
swinging wet with heat
steam from the jungle you emerged
traces my image in blues ultra.

Our touch moved people off the dance floor
and out of recliniers.
Our touch tack-sharped tickled memories
Of Maxine Hong Kingston and Norman Mailer and Gary Snider
trying to levitate
the Pentagon.

While the specifically Diné structure of the poem reflects Belin’s consciousness as a Diné woman, she is also impacted by her urban memories. “Emerged,” “Red,” “Shiny,” “Blessing,” and “wet” are familiar words to the Diné creation stories and associated with Diné sacred geographies; “emergence” is the word used to note the movement into upper worlds; “Red” is the color associated with the sun and rainbow, the element that ties down the sacred mountain; “Shiny” and “black” refer to “jet beads, night blackness, dark mist, different kinds of plants, and many wild animals.” The geographic and visual images within the poem mirror the journey of Changing Woman, associated with the first blessing way ceremony. Yet she depicts an urban encounter. Each of these “directional memories” imparts a sense of balance as they, like the sacred mountains, represent a different stage in her life and place her in the world.

While First Man and First Women used bits of soil from the other worlds to bring the mountains into being, what ties the Diné community to the land and as a cohesive identity is a relationship to Changing-woman (Asdzáá Nádleehé), the female deity that brought into being Diné people through the use of corn, water, and her own skin. In the article “Land into Flesh: Images of Intimacy,” Susan Scarberry-Garcia speaks about the creation of Navajo people as it relates to corn pollen: “Changing Woman created the ancestors of the Navajo by rubbing balls of epidermal waste, mixed with corn pollen, from her breast, back, and arms.” The relationship of land and the maternal body manifests itself in Navajo organizing of citizenship and responsibility. Scarberry continues:

Land and Human beings are one, bound together by the understanding that flesh takes many forms. . . . From birth to death, our bodies, as parts of nature, acquire new contours,
reflecting our experience on earth. The earth nurtures us in our becoming.35

In each section of Belin’s poem, a becoming is taking place. The clan system, reflected in the sacred mountains of the Diné, mark Dinétah (or Diné territory); clan designations pass on through the maternal line and the “becoming” does not rely on a division between men and women, or progress and civilization, but rather on balance.36 Both men and women have important roles in the ceremony. The womanhood ceremony of the Diné, the Kinaalda, is about ritually reconnecting to Changing Woman, the land, these sacred stories, and ancestral places.

The poem uses imagery to address this indirectly. The north, associated with “confidence, assurance, and security,” openly comes across toward the end of the poem with the image of levitating associated with the poets.37 Kingston is often associated with feminist writing; Mailer as a male writer with a heavy, aggressive sense of sexuality; and Snyder as a poet concerned with the rhythms of land—all have a deep connection as California writers. She continues the images with children, or progeny that results from balance: “small children selling Chiclets/trying to levitate their image to heaven.” The juxtaposition between “levitate,” associated with church (“heaven”) and state (“Pentagon”), bounces off the word “emerges” of traditional Diné Philosophy. They do not get into heaven but rather levitate to it. The line “Our touch tender as ginger on tongue forks into the two of us” represents the balance between the genders and these experiences. She maps her urban experience with the meanings of the sacred mountains to bring her female subjectivity into balance with the world around her.

Belin’s last section, “East,” ends her poem and poignantly peels away the colonial mapping of lands and bodies and the seeming effects of the Relocation process. Unlike the previous sections where memories are recalled, the action of nagging memory is much more present:

East

When the awe of downtown Los Angeles
scratches my back
the ghosts of native brothers and sisters
of this tropical climate seers
grade school, high school never told of
their existence
Indian land was far away in another world,
across states lines where
grandparents plant corn and herd sheep
on a brown-eyed/blue-eyed horse . . .

I always forget L.A. has sacred mountains.
In this poem, memory activates her consciousness and situates her in time and space outside a Western linear sense of progress. She ends the poem in the direction of the east and (re)maps the path of Relocation. Rather than ending in the west, the direction of the setting sun and the location of the city, she ends with the rising of a renewed consciousness, further grounded by ending in the direction of the Diné Nation. The east is also the direction of prayer that acknowledges rebirth and Changing Woman and, as mentioned above, is the direction of emphasis for the Diné. The full circle quality of the poem reconnects and creates a Native spatial practice that begins, quite literally, in the place of human emergence for Diné people and the rising of a new day. She attempts to construct a space that is not bounded in a land “far away in another world.” We need to consider the importance of “Directional Memory.” Native women authors are not just representing space as a return to an “original” land or an “original” past/nation/being and thus erasing the layers of time, geography, and history, but also are mediating multiple relationships and, by doing so, navigating ways of being in the world that reflect contemporary Native experiences.

This poem, like much of Belin’s work, extends beyond a personal (re)mapping of her Diné identity. She unmaps state discourses in this east stanza, befitting as in Diné education and philosophies the east is linked to nitsáhákees, or thinking. It is foundational to a child’s education and Diné way of life. In recovering from the onslaught of the schoolroom discourse that creates a tabula rasa of space and erases Native people, Belin relies on Diné epistemologies and crossblood experiences to reconfigure violent cartographies of U.S. nation-building, stating: “I always forget L.A. has sacred mountains.” Her own imagining of Diné directional memory refuses to make absent the Native “brothers and sisters” in the landscape of L.A., and thereby refuses the geopolitical organization of the U.S. nation-state. She ends her poem with respect toward others and, significantly, not on the Diné Reservation, instead reminds herself and her readers that colonialism has set up “Indian” land as in the distance and removed. By not ignoring the “scratches” on her “back” and attempting to reconcile the historical spatial restructuring that Native people have been continually subjected to since the beginning of colonization, Belin is narrating new cartographic encounters in her poetry that stem from a legacy of such colonial spatial restructuring. Furthermore, in her own imagining of her directional memory she refuses to make absent the Native “brothers and sisters” in the landscape of L.A., and disempowers the geopolitical organization of the U.S. nation-state.

Belin uses specific cultural references such as the imagery of the sacred mountains and the four deities, who placed them there, not to mark territory or survey it, but to create an intricate relationship between Diné people and their surroundings. This Diné cartography marks
maternal clan relationships that hold Diné people in a web of reciprocity and respect. This constant production of relationships within figurative (narrated oral stories of clans that inform ways of acting in Diné society) and literal space (the physical mountains) is temporally continuous, but not bounded and static. Marc Warhus, a historian of early Native maps, notes that the physical paper or bark maps are only a small part of Native cartography. In fact, mapping was often an oral process, whereby stories marked much of Natives’ understanding of the world around them: “the Native Americans’ world had been explored, named, and integrated into their experience long before the first Europeans came to the continent. This indigenous knowledge was passed down in songs, stories, and rituals, and the understanding of the landscape it imparted was as sophisticated as that of any western map.”

Belin, though resituated in L.A. as a result of historical processes, is able to (re)map her place in the city as she remembers her movement from place to place, her experiences of becoming a woman, and the stories handed down through generations. She also is able to use Diné philosophies to respect the land upon which she has been brought up and California Indians’ relationships with it, and in doing so is truly uprooting settler geographies.

CONCLUSION

Locating a Native feminism’s spatial dialogue that conceives of space as not bounded by geo-politics, but storyed and continuous, is necessary in developing a discourse that allows Native nation building its fullest potential and members of nations its fullest protection. A Native feminist spatial discourse will converge to form different functions: (1) present alternative methods of reading space, race, gender, and nation and thus assert a political practice that razes ongoing ideologies of colonialism; (2) unmoor “truth” maps from knowledge based on imperialist projects and assert Native ways of knowing that incorporate Native women’s knowledges into the project of decolonization; (3) provide paths and routes to heal the rifts and borders that maps of difference (such as men/women’s space, Rez/urban) continue to construct in the wake of colonialism. Navajo scholar Lloyd Lee profoundly pushes for decolonization of space through the philosophies of hozho and saah naa’ghai bik’eh hozhoon in his essay “Reclaiming Indigenous Intellectual, Political, and Geographic Space.” According to Lee, “Present day resolutions have not restored the health and prosperity of all the people. Navajo thought states that all Navajo people are integral to the continuance of the nation. Navajo people’s spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical wellness is dependent on all people of society, not just a few.”

A dialogue that opens up immutable spaces such as the reservation, itself a colonial structure, becomes extremely important in developing a Native sovereign spatial discourse that includes the “all” mentioned in Lee’s analysis. In Belin’s
poems, breath assures an ongoing set of relationships that is open, and its connection to speaking, telling, praying, and witnessing only assures the power of story to decolonize spatial discourses by reminding of the connections people have to each other and the life-giving force at work.

Although I have been addressing Diné philosophies, my analysis extends to other nations who have their own cultural geographies and their own poets who are working to mediate the consequences of spatial restructuring in the era of Termination, Relocation, and Public Law 280. As Seneca scholar Faye Lone suggests, it is important to look at our social, political, and certainly cultural relationships in a “framework that allows relatedness to a flexible spatial community, one that allows for strong, mobile, symbolic identity that underlies, and perhaps even belies, external influences.”40 These are recreated through symbolic relationships and obligations rather than inherent rights bounded through nation-state models of borders and citizenship. Recalling how breath connects to Changing Woman and clan and community relationships recalls the strength of women. Breath connects Belin to community despite being a “crossblood” or a relocated Diné. The alternative—relying on legal or nation-state concepts of citizenship that bind land and bodies and mirror Western forms of governance—does not create a just spatial “framework” for our future.

NOTES


7 Belin, *From the Belly of My Beauty*, 11.

8 Ibid.


11 See Carole Goldberg-Ambrose, *Planting Tail Feathers: Tribal Survival*
and Public Law 280 (Los Angeles: Regents of the University of California, 1997) for an in-depth study of Public Law 280, specifically as it played out in the state of California.

12 Belin, From the Belly of My Beauty, 20.

13 Ibid., 1, 3.


15 Ramirez credits the word “hub” to Laverne Roberts but throughout her book does an excellent job at exploring how the hub in urban areas has incredible “potential to support political change” across Indian Country. Renya Ramirez, Native Hubs: Culture, Community, and Belonging in Silicon Valley and Beyond (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), 2, 59.

16 This quotation comes from an interview with Floria Forcia, Chicago American Indian Oral History Project, 1982, The Newberry Library and NAES (Native American Education Services) College Library, Chicago.

17 Belin, From the Belly of My Beauty, 11.

18 For more information, see Trudy Griffin-Pierce, Earth Is My Mother, Sky Is My Father (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992), 72.

19 Belin, From the Belly of My Beauty, 54.

20 Ibid., 11.

21 Ibid.

22 Gerald Vizenor, “Shadow Survivance,” in Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999). Vizenor’s work is very useful in discussing the way spatial simulations of the real operate, such as the Rez or borders.


24 Belin, From the Belly of My Beauty, 11.

25 Ibid.


27 Belin, From the Belly of My Beauty, 1.

28 Luci Tapahonso’s poem “This Is How They Were Placed for Us” also uses the four directions, moving from east to west. The importance of the mountains to place both women who experience different geographical, historical, and generational subjectivities links together the poems. See Luci Tapahonso, Blue Horses Rush In: Poems and Stories (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997).

29 Clara Sue Kidwell and Alan Velie, Native American Studies (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 83.


32 Belin, From the Belly of My Beauty, 8.

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