

“Placing” the Spiritual Metaphors of Contemporary Women Writers:

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

Like feminist theory in its use of metaphors of travel and mobility, traditional conversion narrative structure also depends on the association between physical movement (at least symbolically) and spiritual development. Contemporary women writers have certainly continued

this pattern. According to David J. Leigh, “The use of a directional image implies, of course, that the storyteller is going somewhere, even if it is, as Eliot says, ‘to arrive where we started / And to know the place for the first time.’ The image provides the dynamic of movement and the hint of a goal to be reached” (2). Structuring a conversion narrative around the metaphor of a journey or some other directional image emphasizes the constructed nature of autobiography: it is only in retrospect that writers can name the goal toward which all their wanderings were leading them. A narrative emphasizing development actually tends to prioritize time over space: if places are prominent, they mainly serve the purpose of demonstrating linear progress occurring over time. In this type of conversion narrative, as in much recent feminist theory, “time is equated with movement and progress, [while] ‘space/place’ is equated with stasis and reaction” (Massey 151).

What is the problem with feminists using metaphors and structures based on development? Elizabeth A. Pritchard offers some insightful answers. According to her, feminists themselves have, by such extensive use of metaphors of mobility, reinforced one of the divisions they claim to resist: the “binary that associates liberation and development with mobility and links oppression and underdevelopment with containment or stasis” (45). All too often, she argues, feminist theorists have conformed to the pattern of the Western “[e]nlightenment narrative of development,” a “narrative that tells of an escape or exit from a locatedness that is deemed to be restrictive.” In this type of narrative, “locatedness suggests confinement, enclosure, or the stasis of ‘tradition.’ Consequently, ‘development,’ in this schema, does not entail arriving at some particular ‘place’” (46–47). Furthermore, Pritchard argues, when one associates tradition and locatedness with backwardness, one lends support to the kind of rhetoric that justifies the nativist assumption that these Western narratives of progress are the ones that the rest of the world should follow.

But some contemporary women writers are presenting powerful alternative metaphors for feminist spirituality, many of them involving specific spatial images that ground religious experience in particular

places, while also reclaiming that ground from patriarchy. For writers such as Kathleen Norris, author of creative nonfiction such as *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (1993) and *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (1998), and Sue Monk Kidd, author of the memoir *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter* (1996) and the highly popular novel *The Secret Life of Bees* (2002), the overall structural metaphor of a protagonist's return to a place associated with her mother becomes a way of emphasizing a non-patriarchal religious inheritance. However, as the example of Kidd illustrates, simply using spatial metaphors is no guarantee against universalizing and essentializing. Because Kidd's language and metaphors favor the universal over the particular, she, a white writer, ends up using African American women as a symbol for women's spirituality rather than allowing them to be characters in their own right. *The Secret Life of Bees*, in particular, shows the danger of ungrounded spiritual metaphors: they can all too easily become racist and appropriate the religious experience of others for themselves.

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

Though Kidd speaks of how her spiritual awakening involved "un-

raveling” and “unlearning” (*Dance* 33), the overall structure of *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter* mirrors Christian conversion narratives of the past. The only difference is that her destination is the “sacred feminine” or orthodox eclecticism—a different goal, but the same process, same structure, same trope of enlightenment. Empowerment, the end goal, comes in the form of finding a sacred place within oneself: “It wasn’t enough to have a sacred place, to go into a circle of trees in the woods. I needed to become the circle of trees, to be the sacred place wherever I went, to dwell so deeply inside of me that there was no separation between us” (*Dance* 217). The destination of the inward journey is this sacred “place” inside oneself. At times, Kidd does resist her own linear impulses, claiming,

rarely is any awareness or process on this journey a one-time event. We seem to return to it over and over, each time integrating it a bit more fully, owning it a little more deeply. I may be laying out the general contours of the feminine spiritual process, but there are no neat, clear-cut lines where one phase precisely ends and the next begins. (98)

Yet each spiral of this inward journey seems to lead to greater enlightenment, greater self-knowledge.

Even so, despite Kidd’s attempts to nuance her language of progress, her metaphors are ultimately Cartesian, Enlightenment-derived, and thus still part of the patriarchal tradition she claims to be escaping. Furthermore, Kidd’s metaphors tend to eschew the local in favor of images of movement, a trend Pritchard also observes in the writings of many Western feminist theorists. Kidd uses images of entrapment and confinement to describe her condition before finding the “sacred feminine.” Both she and the protagonists of her later novels experience the search for the divine within themselves as crossing frontiers, transgressing borders, breaking free. In a passage typical of *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*’s figurative language, Kidd writes, “A woman’s initiation includes many moments of crossing a threshold. This threshold is the bridge to our feminine soul, and crossing over is the beginning of be-

coming. By crossing it we are moving into a new landscape of feminine consciousness" (108).

To be fair, Kidd does balance her metaphors by speaking also of productive, nurturing confinement.¹ She writes of her own need to "capture" herself and tend to her soul (89), going on to imply that every woman needs this kind of "space" (though, again, she is describing a place within the self rather than a literal place): "She needs an embracing, open-armed space where she can dissolve, go to seed, and regenerate. A place to be still and tend new roots" (94). The way she uses the image of roots, though exaggerated, suggests her awareness that roots, tradition, history are invaluable to many women (not to mention impossible to jettison, since they form much of one's identity, like it or not). However, it is clear that this germinating stage is simply one phase in a linear development. Though Kidd's trees do remain rooted, they grow upward and provide shelter for new seedlings, in addition to becoming "women who let loose our strength, whose truth, creativity, and vision fly like spores into the world" (198).

Kidd's suggestion that these women-trees simply need to be transplanted from masculine-dominated ground to new, more nourishing feminine ground is overly simplistic. The image of transplanting once again emphasizes that, for Kidd, space is static, and spiritual growth is possible only with movement, with seeking new ground. Of course, a narrative focusing on geographical movement and linear spiritual growth need not be problematic and may indeed be feminist. However, in Kidd's case, her view of space as fixed leads to her impulses to appropriate objects and traditions from other cultures and to bring them within her own "place." After Kidd leaves the Southern Baptist sect for her own journey "within," she begins to seek the more abstract spiritual Mother, exploring various historical manifestations of "the divine feminine," from Cretan goddesses to the Virgin Mary. However, she buttresses her abstract quest with material reality: she collects various objects from around the world that represent the divine feminine to her

¹Images of confined space (a confinement that is necessary for a time in order to promote creativity) also appear in feminist literary studies such as Judith Fryer's.

and places them on an altar in her home, creating her own sacred space. In the process, she divorces these objects from their original context, treating them as a-spatial products to be consumed. She writes of a new acquisition: “The Matryoshka doll found a place on my altar. Eventually, though, she came to represent not only the Divine Feminine at the core of a woman but also the line of mothers I came from” (181). A similar fate awaits a Minoan snake goddess figure. These objects from diverse locations are transplanted to Kidd’s sacred ground and made to represent an abstraction perhaps completely unrelated to their original cultural context.

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

Kidd’s misuse of African American women’s subversion as a metaphor for (white) female empowerment seems related to her use of geographical metaphors for (again, white) women’s spiritual development. In both of Kidd’s recent novels, *The Secret Life of Bees* and *The Mermaid Chair* (2005), the female protagonist makes a literal journey

across space to a place associated with her mother, and there she experiences a spiritual rebirth. However, the result of this rebirth is to render place (and the literal mother) unnecessary, for Lily and Jessie find “home” within themselves and are nurtured by the “mother” within. The metaphor of place erases real places.

Indeed, this ability to render place unnecessary seems to be what separates Kidd’s newly enlightened protagonist from the maternal African American figures who serve her spiritual needs. African American characters, particularly in *The Secret Life of Bees*, remain rooted in place in their stereotypical earthiness, even though it is August, one of Lily’s black “stand-in mothers” (287), who tells Lily that “[o]ur Lady [both the Madonna and the more general representative of the “sacred feminine”] is not some magical being out there somewhere, like a fairy godmother. She’s not the statue in the parlor. She’s something inside of you” (288). Through August’s tutelage, the white protagonist is freed from the need for literal place and for a literal mother. Lily does remain at the bee-keeping house with August at the end of the novel, but Kidd makes it clear that, thanks to August’s tutoring, Lily will be able to journey wherever she wants with the divine mother inside herself. The physical object that has so inspired her, the statue known as Our Lady of Chains, remains in the bee-keeping women’s parlor. The Boatwright sisters and their friends, the Daughters of Mary, reenact each year the story of the statue: how a white slave owner chained her down, but how she broke free of her chains, inspiring the slaves to plan their own escape. Yet, within the novel, reenactment and remembrance are the only freedom the Daughters of Mary experience from the injustice of the 1960s South.

In Kidd’s maternal spatial metaphors, despite her good intentions, her African American women characters become objects, simply there for the psycho-spiritual gratification of the white protagonist Lily: *The Secret Life of Bees*, perhaps unknowingly, glorifies the white female domestic fantasy of the self-sacrificing black mammy, giving this old stereotype the new gloss of the “sacred feminine.” *Bees* does include some condemnation of racial prejudice in the 1960s South: Kidd’s own deployment of racist stereotypes in the characters of August and Rosaleen is probably

unintentional, though this makes it no less egregious. The problem lies not only in Kidd's personal insensitivity but also in her failure to spatialize her "spiritual geography" fully;² the spiritual, for her, is not spatial in any but the most superficial sense. Therefore, an airy pop spiritualism can be projected onto the characters she selects as the objective correlative for expressing these beliefs. Who better to mouth maternal spirituality than black women, who, according to long-held white American stereotypes, are inherently religious, bosomy earth-mothers? Kidd neglects to explore the way these associations are historically grounded in space, particularly the space of domestic households in the South, though this history is her characters' history as well as her own. August was originally the maid who reared Lily's mother, Deborah, and when Deborah finds herself trapped in an unhappy marriage, she runs away to her surrogate mother, never stopping to consider whether August feels the same way about her. When, years later, Lily too runs away from her father, she follows her mother's trail, thanks to a card with the image of the Black Madonna—the Boatwright sisters' label for their honey jars—on it, thereby also imposing upon August's seemingly inexhaustible ability to nurture little white girls.

Lily's own displacement of her need for a mother onto August parallels Kidd's own use of the Black Madonna as a symbol forced to bear the author's healing, nurturing message. In a 2003 interview, Kidd explained that she felt no personal connection with Lily's longing for her biological mother (because Kidd's own mother was still alive at the time she wrote the novel), but, she continued, "as I was writing I understood that I did know about that other longing for this larger, we could say, spiritual mother. In the book *I let the Black Madonna carry all that*" (qtd. in Schlumpf, emphasis added). The Black Madonna, despite her particular history and her particular meaning to a group of oppressed people, is made to bear universal metaphorical weight. Kidd's universalism comes across clearly in another interview-based article, in which Janet Kinoshian writes that Kidd "suggests women react so strongly to her characters because of this elemental and universal feminine quest.

²According to Kathleen Norris, "spiritual geography" is the formation of a "story out of the circumstances of landscape and inheritance" (*Dakota* 2).

After all, the characters who inhabit her work are earthy, fleshy women, so dissimilar to the images perpetuated by Hollywood.” Neither Kidd nor Kinoshian draws attention to the fact that the first instance of “women” in this quotation refers almost exclusively to white women, while the second refers almost exclusively to black women. White equals spirit, black equals flesh; it’s the same dualistic racism that has characterized white stereotypes for over two centuries. Perhaps because of traditional white spirituality’s lack of celebration of embodiedness, many whites have projected this quality onto darker-skinned people, seeing in the (oppressed) Other a power to liberate repressed white society. Kidd revels in the Black Madonna’s power as a universal symbol to liberate white women. She said in an interview, “Her darkness has great power in it. She becomes a flashpoint for independent spirit, for women conjuring up their own strength and their own power, being their own authority.” Kidd then continued, “She also has a subversive streak in her, which I resonate with. Yes, I’m a Christian, but I’m pretty much a dissident sort of Christian in a lot of ways” (qtd. in Schlumpf). Robbed of her particularity, the Black Madonna is appropriated to liberate white women and Kidd herself from patriarchal Christianity, just as Kidd once expected her family’s African American maid to do for her.

In “The Slave Chair” Kidd recounts how Grovinia allowed her to catch tadpoles, even though to do so was considered improper for a young white girl. She writes,

During the race-turbulent years I was in college, I told my mother the story of the tadpoles and speculated that women like Grovinia became the consciousness of values within many white families, functioning as the hidden voice of dissidence which vibrated in the white children they reared. I said, “Grovinia taught me subversion.”

Kidd’s mother then replies, “I’m so glad, because I wasn’t able.” While Kidd has the wisdom to see Grovinia as a strong agent rather than a simple victim, this passage foreshadows her later tendency to

turn black women into liberating symbols rather than celebrating their strength in an emplaced, embodied, and yet spiritual context.

On Kidd's web site, she comments on her inspiration and intentions for the Black Madonna in much the same language she used in her interview responses. However, she adds one particularly telling observation:

I read an essay by author Kathleen Norris in which she made the amazing statement that Mary is particularly suited to post-modernism. She didn't elaborate on the reason, but my guess is that Mary, fresh with feminist appropriations, has the potential to undergird women's reformations. ("Black")

If Kidd is referring to the chapter "Virgin Mary, Mother of God" from Norris's *Amazing Grace*, she is mistaken: Norris does elaborate on what she means by Mary's postmodern attributes, writing of Mary's ability to "confront and disarm the polarities that so often bring human endeavors to impasse: the subjective and the objective, the expansive and the parochial, the affective and the intellectual" (122)—as well as concrete space and metaphorical space. Persisting in her own dualisms, however, Kidd fails to see this complexity and instead resorts to very white "feminist appropriations" that reinforce the binary between black and white, material and metaphorical.

Even though decontextualized, despatialized metaphors for spirituality, as Kidd employs them, may lead to universalism and a de-valuing of particulars (especially the particulars of others), such need not always be the case. No stranger to metaphor herself, Kathleen Norris offers a more sensitive and fruitful approach to the use of spatial metaphors for feminist spirituality. However, not until she left New York City and returned to her maternal grandmother's home in South Dakota did she discover geographical metaphors as an especially effective way of connecting her individual spirituality to her mother's religious heritage—and, by extension, to the greater maternal tradition within Christianity. In the process, she celebrates the particular landscape of South Dakota without resorting to provinciality.

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

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

In many Christian conversion narratives, the new convert feels "out of place" in the former community and must move to a new location in order to find acceptance. The geographical move becomes representative (at least in the narrative telling) of the spiritual transformation the writer has already undergone. In Norris's narrative, however, her geographical move *precedes* her turn to Christianity, and she portrays her conversion in a nonlinear way—as the book is organized into vignettes, meditations, and "weather reports"—as a result of learning to dwell in

her new community. Conversion follows “the basic principle of desert survival: not only to know where you are but to learn to love what you find there” (*Dakota* 23). This process involves learning to love one’s own religious inheritance, accepting it as both blessing and curse. For Norris, then, the movement of conversion stretches in all directions, backward and forward, up and down, rather than conforming to a simple linear pattern.

Similarly, Norris attributes this paradoxical stationary, yet mobile, quality to religion as a whole. “At its Latin root,” she reminds her readers, “the word religion is linked to the words ligature and ligament, words having both positive and negative connotations, offering both bondage and freedom of movement” (133). Norris did freely choose to move to South Dakota to her maternal grandmother’s house from New York City. However, she celebrates the way that the limited circumstances of her new place steered her in directions she never would have considered for herself. In the limits of place—and her lack of options—she experiences the divine. She reports that she is sometimes asked by more urban friends why she chose to explore spirituality in Christian monasteries rather than Buddhist ones. She replies,

The answer is geography, of course; I would have had to travel more than five hundred miles. And I didn’t have the money. . . . More or less forced to take a good look at where I was, and take advantage of what was available locally, I was also forced to find sustenance within my own religious heritage. And I found it much more various, rich, and nourishing than I had ever imagined. (*Amazing* 293–94)

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

Norris’s vision of religion as both captivating and liberating, as return and as new frontier, is intimately connected to the particulars of

the place of her conversion, the place of her dwelling. Her biological roots lead her to the Presbyterian church where her grandmother worshipped, but she attributes her realization of the importance of her religious inheritance to the past and continued presence of Native Americans in South Dakota:

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

According to some geographers of religion, sacred space may be defined as a place of conflict, where one group seeks to trump another's claim to a site. Norris's depiction of all these influences—the Protestant churches, the Benedictine monasteries, and the Native Americans—"com[ing] together" may seem rosy, given the history of white imperialism in the American West, the massacre of many Native Americans, and the theft of their sacred land. However, at least Norris does not ignore this aspect of Dakota's spiritual geography, and in fact this history is the reason she is compelled to redefine "frontier," a word often used thoughtlessly in spiritual autobiography: "the fact that one people's frontier is usually another's homeland has been mostly overlooked" (127). Norris defines frontier "not as a place you exploit and abandon but as a place where you build on the past for the future" (133). Spiritual geography must be attentive to the history of a place as well as to one's own personal history. When the two meet, conversion takes place.

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

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

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

Furthermore, Norris's quest for her own place-based religious tradition leads her to express concern over the appropriation of Native American land and spirituality by others, another reason she is especially careful to emphasize the exploration of one's own religious and

cultural roots: in her lifetime she has seen far too much appropriation of Native American spirituality by whites seeking to escape the burdens of their own heritage. In the 1950s, “Indian words and symbols were appropriated to sell a myth of freedom on the American road. Pontiac, Cherokee, even the sacred Thunderbird” (29). However, by the 1980s, white Americans, turned shallow by their lack of their own meaningful interconnections among religion, ancestors, and place, began to pilfer these elements from Native American religions. Norris points out that white Americans’ romantic longing for the religious Other has

forced people whose religions have become trendy in our time, American Indians and Buddhist monks among them, to grow adept at sorting out people who have an adult grasp of their own religious traditions and those who are seeking interfaith dialogue from those who are trying to escape their own inheritance by simply appropriating someone else’s. (*Amazing* 83)

She then tells the tale of a young American friend who went to Thailand and tried to join a Buddhist monastery there. “Go back home and become a Christian monk first, they told him, learn your own tradition” (83). Knowing one’s own particular tradition, whether one ends up accepting or rejecting it, teaches one where one is.

One might ask, then, why *Dakota*, in addition to crediting the influence of Native American spirituality and Norris’s own Protestant forebears, also draws so much from Benedictine and even earlier desert monasticism. After all, Norris’s move to South Dakota roots her “in the ground of [her] grandmother’s faith” (*Dakota* 93), and the maternal elements of her conversion allow her to find a feminist place within Christianity; these Benedictine monks are a community exclusively composed of men.³ Moreover, they are hardly an organic out-

³There are, of course, Benedictine nuns as well, and Norris occasionally visits Benedictine convents. However, because Benedictine monasteries are closer to her geographically, they are where she most often goes to wrestle out her faith.

growth of the Dakota land—their status as transplants is as obvious as one could imagine. However, Norris, drawn inexplicably to Benedictine monasteries, finds in their theology and their relationship to place a way to embrace more fully her maternal inheritance of Christianity as well as to remain responsive to the place in which she lives. Benedictine communities are distinguished by two particular, seemingly paradoxical vows: the vow of stability and the vow of *conversatio*, or continual conversion. Stability binds the monastics to a particular community; it commits them to learn to dwell in a fruitful way with place and the people who inhabit it. Continual conversion demands that the monastic stays open to change, ever seeking new ways of relating to place, people, and God. Norris emphasizes that the “both/and” nature of these vows is essential to her experience of emplaced Christianity:

We know what happens when we have stability without conversion; we end up stagnant, curled up comfortable with that familiar idol called “This is the way we’ve always done it.” And conversion without stability may describe the current state of affairs with regard to the spiritual life in America. Many seem to value change for its own sake; we’re always after something new. But when seeking the holy becomes a goal in itself, the last thing we want to do is find it. In all of the religious traditions I know, anything that feels like finding translates into commitment. And like conversion itself, commitment is scary. (*Amazing* 42)

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

In living out my conversion as a daily and lifelong process, I treasure most the example of my grandmother Totten, who dwelled in one marriage, one home, one church congregation for over sixty years. . . . [H]er life demonstrates that conversion . . . does not mean seeking out the most exotic spiritual experience, or the ideal religion, the holiest teachers who will give us the greatest return on

our investment. Conversion is seeing ourselves, and the ordinary people in our families, our classrooms, and on the job, in a new light. (44)

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

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

In response to the illusion of opaqueness and the illusion of transparency, Soja proposes not a mere synthesis but the creation of "third-space," an arena in which "the original binary choice is not dismissed entirely but is subjected to a creative process of restructuring that draws selectively and strategically from the two opposing categories to open

new alternatives” (*Thirdspace* 5). In this thirdspace, the theorist uses a “trialectical” approach and insists that “each ‘field’ of human spatiality—the physical, the mental, the social—be seen as simultaneously real and imagined, concrete and abstract, material and metaphorical” (65). For Christian writers who emphasize place, the Incarnation may be this kind of thirdspace—not a fixed, static location nor an airy, transcendent one, but a complex reality enveloping in ever-changing ways physical, mental, and social circumstances.

In much current writing about Christian spirituality and place, the Incarnation symbolizes the value inherent in every time and location.⁴ Ideally, the Christian cultivates a meaningful relationship with the particulars of her location but also recognizes that Jesus’ becoming human—the infinite God’s demonstration of the significance of finite human contexts—grants equal validity to all times and places. As David Brown writes,

for God to impact on every aspect of us immanence must also be claimed: God involved with matter. Christians believe that this happened at the deepest and most profound level in the incarnation, but if there is to be a continuing effect this cannot have happened just once, but must relate to all material existence. (81–82)

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

identity through counterposition to the other which lies beyond, but precisely (in part) through the specificity of the mix of links and interconnections to that 'beyond'" (5). Incarnational theology in its emphasis on particularity at least partially bases access to the divine Other on the networks of relationships between human others, because incarnational Christians believe that each human other can embody Christ.

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

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

An orange butterfly lights on my arm. The abbey bells begin to ring. I had resisted coming here, but a clergy friend said:

“You’ll go to the monastery, pull yourself together, and write it out.”

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

Norris unknowingly finds herself uttering the same words Jesus speaks in John 2:4 after the host at the wedding has run out of wine and Mary has asked her Son to do something about it.⁵ Mary does not fully understand what she is asking, but Jesus nevertheless responds by turning water into wine for the wedding guests. This is the first miracle Jesus performs, according to John, and in juxtaposing her own story against this scriptural one, Norris implies that some miracle will occur in her life as well, that her watery experience with organized religion will be transformed into joyful, celebratory wine. She may not be able to accept abstract language about Christ, but she finds herself speaking His words, embodying them in a new context. Yet this is not merely an individual experience, as Norris sets this event within the larger context of rural communities in South Dakota. In her spiritual geography, ancient Christian history, her present natural and social surroundings, as well as her personal experience, all combine in unexpected ways to create sacred space.

For Norris and for other Christian writers, the Incarnation is not only the meeting place between self and other, but also between materiality and metaphor. While the material is usually associated with the local and the particular, and metaphor often takes on connotations of universality, an incarnational emphasis makes this easy dualism impossible. In the theology of the medieval Scottish Franciscan Duns Scotus, from whom many Christians, knowingly or unknowingly, have drawn incarnational spirituality, “each individual or particular thing is more than a *symbol* of something greater. That would make it dispensable,

⁵Or at least a paraphrase of this passage, which actually reads, “Jesus saith unto her, Woman, what have I to do with thee? Mine hour is not yet come.” Most interpreters agree that in this passage Jesus is responding to Mary’s request by suggesting that there are larger messianic implications that she herself does not yet understand.

usable then disposable” (Sheldrake “Human” 58, emphasis added). Instead of merely existing to point to Christ, each material thing exists to be itself, and in being itself it also embodies Christ.⁶ As Sheldrake explains,

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

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

He said: “You want to hay your brome and crested wheatgrass. They’re the taller, more lush grasses, not native, and they’ll lose their nutritive value quickly. Any moisture and they’ll frost-kill. But the native short-grass—that’s your grama and buffalo grass, sedges and switch grass—makes for good winter pasture. You let it stand, and it cures on the stem.” (154)

This is the entire section. Norris allows both the farmer’s words and the subject of his speech—shortgrass—to represent the value of rootedness and of spiritual endurance. The section’s title suggests that this goes beyond mere representation, that God is embodied and ex-

⁶If this sounds a lot like Gerard Manley Hopkins’s sonnet “As Kingfishers Catch Fire,” there’s a reason it does: Hopkins was an avid reader of Scotus, referring to him in the poem “Duns Scotus’s Oxford” as “he . . . who of all

pressed through such natural details.

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

The question of inheritance still haunts me, and I sometimes have the radical notion that I'm a Christian the way a Jew is a Jew, by maternal lineage. . . . I may have put on my grandmother Totten's religion until it became my own. But the currents of this female inheritance spring from deep waters. Mary is also my ancestor, as is Eve. (95)

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

Perhaps because of Norris's emphasis on Incarnation, Mary, who conceived and gave birth to Jesus, does appear more frequently than Eve in her writing. She writes in spatial terms of the moment in time when Mary conceives: "the Incarnation is the *place*, if you will, where hope contends with fear" (*Amazing* 30, emphasis added). She writes of the original place in which Christ's Incarnation began: "Coming from Galilee, as it were, from a place of little hope, it reveals the ordinary circumstances of my life to be full of mystery, and gospel, which means, 'good news'" (31). Because the Incarnation happened in a scorned

⁷The Annunciation, in which the angel Gabriel tells Mary that she will conceive and bear the Christ child, occurs in Mary's hometown of Nazareth in the region of Galilee. At that time, Galileans were widely regarded as ignorant, backward, and poor, with "hick" accents. This is why, when Nathanael first hears of Jesus, he asks incredulously, "Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46).

place—Galilee—among marginalized people,⁷ the particulars of this context change how Norris sees the specific circumstances of her own time and place. For Norris, then, maternal space is primarily the space of incarnate reality: again, the space where the abstract and the particular merge, the space of both her biological mothers and her mothers in the faith, who come together to form her spiritual geography.

Like Kidd, Norris laments the absence of Mary in her Protestant upbringing. She rejoices in having found contemporary writers who celebrate Mary as “a catalyst for boundary-breaking experiences, contradiction, and paradox” (120). At Guadalupe, Mary appeared as a *mestiza* and, Norris writes, “the scandal of miscegenation was given a holy face and name,” an event recalling for her “the scandal of the Incarnation itself, the mixing together of human and divine in a young, unmarried woman” (120). Mary not only retains her particularity as a Galilean teenager, but she also embodies fully the suffering and strength of *mestizos* in Latin America: Galilee and Guadalupe fuse and yet remain distinct, as Mary collapses and expands spiritual geography. Norris writes that she has come “to think of Mary as the patron saint of ‘both/and’ passion over ‘either/or’ reasoning” (121):

Ever since I first encountered Mary in that Benedictine abbey I have learned never to discount her ability to confront and disarm the polarities that so often bring human endeavors to impasse: the subjective and objective, the expansive and the parochial, the affective and the intellectual. (121–22)

In other words, Mary functions as a *thirdspace*, allowing Norris to find her own place within a religion that had once seemed patriarchal to her. “There’s a lot of room in Mary,” writes Norris (123)—room for particular and global experiences to mix in powerful combinations.

Mary, whose participation was crucial to Christ’s Incarnation, is a *thirdspace* who breaks down boundaries between human and divine. Christ’s Incarnation is the central metaphor for Christians’ relationship to particulars; however, because Christ happened to be incarnate in a male body, many women find it easier to contemplate the Incar-

nation through Mary. Though she herself is not divine, it is her body that gives life to Jesus' body. Thus, for many Christians, both male and female, Mary is the prime human example of what it is like to "bear" Christ, as all Christians are now commissioned to do.⁸

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

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

⁸The famous poem by Saint Teresa of Avila emphasizes the way in which Christ's incarnation continues in human bodies: "Christ has no body now but yours / No hands, no feet on earth but yours / Yours are the eyes with which he looks / compassion on this world. / Christ has no body now on earth but yours" (Teresa).

“expecting”). The next stanza features a Madonna and child in a photograph of Norris’s sister and niece in which “Lili sits like the Christ child / on her mother’s lap” (ll. 27–28). Norris herself cannot physically give birth, but she still believes that “[i]t’s here, in the land of the living / the psalm says we shall see God’s goodness” (ll. 32–33). Indeed, it is in the land and the circumstances of Norris’s life that she sees goodness, a goodness in particular places and people, a goodness in the birthing and blood and even barrenness of women’s bodies, a goodness reaffirmed by the conception and birth of God as a human. The Incarnation, as a metaphor, balances transcendence and immanence, the global and the local: Norris’s circumstances, though distinct from the nativity of Christ, can embody this divine story in new ways.

Els Maeckelbergh writes, “Mary, on the one hand, is the symbol of one who transcends all classes, and regional and local differences. She enhances a community feeling: everybody comes together in front of her shrine,” which exists in a particular location (39). Indeed, for centuries, pilgrims all over the world have seen in Mary an incarnational metaphor that balances global and local, universal and particular. However, despite Mary’s relevance to all classes, one needs to remain conscious of difference as well: it is the poor, more than any others, who have claimed experiences of Marian visitation. What one must remember, when one uses incarnational metaphors involving Mary or Christ, is that incarnation is always shrouded in cultural particulars, and that these cultural particulars will inevitably be different. Thus, incarnational metaphors for spirituality can become one way of accomplishing what Susan Stanford Friedman has referred to as “locational feminism.” According to Friedman,

Locational feminism pays attention to the specificities of time and place, but unlike fundamentalist identity politics, it is not parochially limited to a single feminist formation and takes as its founding principle the multiplicity of heterogeneous feminist movements and the conditions that produce them. (5)

Thinking of the divine as necessarily expressed through particulars

helps to prevent the assumption that one's own particulars are the same as others'—or from appropriating the particulars of others.

Of course, language emphasizing the Incarnation is particular to the Christian faith and therefore of most relevance to Christian feminists. But examining incarnation as one particular lens for feminist spirituality may help feminists of other faiths to look to their own particulars to find empowering, yet difference-respecting metaphors. If one acknowledges particular contexts and draws inspiration from them, one may be less likely to assume that there is one single “feminist spirituality” or that a single culturally-bound definition of the “sacred feminine” can be imposed on others. Though Kidd may be trying to honor the spiritual traditions of African American women in her work, she ends up connecting them to a very white vision of the “sacred feminine” while claiming that her particular vision is universal. However, if one recognizes particulars as valuable in themselves, as Norris does in her incarnational spiritual geography, one will be less likely to mistake them for universals. As Kaplan writes, “Exploring all the differences, keeping identities distinct is the only way we can keep power differentials”—differentials of place, of gender, of religion, of race—“from masquerading as universals” (“Deterritorializations” 194).

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