

L'ANALISI LINGUISTICA E LETTERARIA

FACOLTÀ DI SCIENZE LINGUISTICHE E LETTERATURE STRANIERE
UNIVERSITÀ CATTOLICA DEL SACRO CUORE

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A cura di Elisa Bolchi e Davide Vago

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“DIRECTION? ... THERE WAS NO DIRECTION.
THE PRAIRIE STRETCHED TO THE END OF THE WORLD”.
AMERICAN LAND AND THE PIONEER WOMAN

PAOLA A. NARDI

Black Soil, a novel written by an Irish pioneer woman, tells about her arrival and settlement in the Iowa prairies in the second half of the 19th century. The goal of my essay is to investigate the strategies the immigrant woman Nell Connor adopts to survive on the American frontier.

Keywords: American West, the frontier, the Pioneer Woman, space, place, ecocriticism

The American wilderness, the frontier, the conquest of the West are some of the founding myths of the United States. They have also shaped the concept of the ‘American Dream’ as conceived by a European perspective that had imagined the New World as a land of plenty, a second Eden, an *El Dorado*, where the ‘Old World’ could have a second chance and profit of the endless resources of the New Continent. In his *Wilderness and the American Mind* Roderick Nash writes that

the discovery of the New World rekindled the traditional European notion that an earthly paradise lay somewhere to the west [...]. One theme in paradise myth stressed the material and sensual attributes of the new land. It fed on reports of fabulous riches, a temperate climate, longevity and garden-like natural beauty¹.

However, these dreams of a second Eden quickly vanished against the reality of North America as soon as the first frontiersmen, and frontierswomen, realized that the New Continent was everything but a paradise. Pioneers lived too close to the wilderness to appreciate it and consequently pioneers’ main goal became the ‘conquest’ of the wilderness with a hostile attitude and a utilitarian approach towards it. Pioneers viewed the wild land before them as something to be transformed into a rural and controlled space where the dangerous, boundless and untamed nature became domesticated.

This stereotyped, partial and illusory myth of conquest has been extensively criticized in the last thirty years. New perspectives, like those of the Native Americans, feminist theo-

¹ R. Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1979, p. 25. Nash’s volume is now considered a classic study of the attitudes toward the wilderness during American history as well as of the origins of the environmental and conservation movements.

rists or ecocritics, have suggested different interpretations of the expansion towards the Pacific, the subjugation of the land and the transformation of the wilderness. As Buell states:

It has become emphatically clear that orthodox versions of American literary naturalism, like the myth of the American Adam, have been based on texts by Anglo-American males; that American men have historically written somewhat differently about nature than have American women; [...]; and that the closeness of felt interdependence between literary expression and the natural environment varies according to the cultures of race and gender as well as that of region².

Annette Kolodny and Nina Baym have been among the first scholars who have shown from an eco-feminist point of view how women writers who dealt with frontier life and wilderness had “their own version of the male Arcadian dream”³. They also pointed out that considering the wilderness romance from Copper to Hemingway as the centre of the novelistic tradition of the United States led to dismiss women’s fiction and women’s history in some way. In *Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters*, Annette Kolodny offers one of the first ecofeminist systematic documentations, back to the early sixteenth century settlers in America, of the recurrent responses to the American continent as a feminine identity; as Mother, as Virgin, as Temptress, as the Ravished. American male heroes often turn to nature as a sweetheart and nurture, searching in the land and mainly in the wilderness, the satisfaction of their desires including, among these, the desires for mastery and power:

What is probably America’s oldest and most cherished fantasy [is] a daily reality of harmony between man and nature based on an experience of the land as essential feminine – that is not simply the land as mother, but the land as woman, the total female principle of gratification – enclosing the individual in an environment of receptivity, response, and painless and integral satisfaction. From the accounts of the earliest explorers onward, [...] a uniquely American pastoral vocabulary began to show itself [...]. At its core lay a yearning to know and to respond to the landscape as feminine, a yearning that I have labeled as the uniquely American ‘pastoral impulse’⁴.

This metaphor has mainly two consequences: first it makes it difficult for a female writer to take part in this tradition that sees the land as a feminine identity; secondly, it leads to a justification of a destructive attitude towards the land, equating in Val Plumwood’s words “women’s oppression [with] the domination of nature”⁵. This equation was theo-

² L. Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1995, p. 16.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁴ A. Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 1975, pp. 4, 8.

⁵ V. Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Routledge, New York 1993, p. 1.

rized among others by eco-feminist critic Karen Warren in an essay she wrote in 1990⁶, although Susan Griffin and Ariel Salleh⁷ had already written about the topic respectively in 1978 and in 1984. In the preface to her book *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*, Griffin observes that "men consider women to be more material than themselves, or more part of nature. The fact that man does not consider himself a part of nature, but indeed considers himself superior to matter, seemed to me to gain significance when placed against man's attitude that woman is both inferior to him and closer to nature"⁸.

The goal of my essay is to investigate the strategies that the immigrant woman Nell Connor adopts to survive on the American frontier in Josephine Donovan's novel *Black Soil*, published in 1930. Donovan narrates the arrival around the 1870s, and the first years of life, of an Irish American Catholic family in the prairies of contemporary Sioux County, Iowa, near the border with South Dakota. The leading question of this reading is whether Nell Connor manages to transform the unknown space of a specific section of the American frontier into a place related to her self, into a "center of felt value, where biological needs, such as those for food, water, rest, and procreation, are satisfied"⁹. Frederick Turner brilliantly sums up the relation between Americans and the natural landscape in the context of the American wilderness and the conquest of the West:

Americans confronted with a natural landscape that have either exploited it or designated it as a wilderness area. The polluter and the ecology freak are two faces of the same coin; they both perpetuate a theory about nature that allows no alternative to raping it or tying it up in a plastic bag to protect it from contamination¹⁰.

Does Nell O'Connor, the main character of *Black Soil*, manage to find a different solution? Is there any alternative or a mediating term between these two ideological positions, "the polluter" and "the ecology freak"? My approach to the novel follows the perspective adopted by Annette Kolodny in her *The Land Before Her*. In her first volume *The Lay of the Land*, Kolodny had analyzed the male experience of the land and had concluded that "male

⁶ In her essay Warren writes: "An oppressive patriarchal conceptual framework has functioned historically (within at least dominant Western culture) to sanction the twin dominations of women and nature" through the association of women with nature and the physical, and men with the "human" and the mental and "the assumed inferiority of the physical vis-à-vis the mental". See K. Warren, *The Power and Promise of Ecological Feminism*, "Environmental Ethics", 12, 1990, p. 124.

⁷ "Feminists should not shun the double edged metaphor of Mother-Nature. This nexus both describes the source of women's power and integrity, and at the same time, exposes the complex set of pathological practices known as patriarchy: ecological crisis its latest symptom. Feminists can use this metaphor to bring the sons of patriarchy in touch with the origin of their compensatory drive to dominate and reassemble the world – woman, nature, whatever is Other." Ariel K. Salleh, *From Feminism to Ecology*, "Social Alternatives", 4, 1984, 3, p. 12.

⁸ S. Griffin, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*, Harper and Row, New York 1978, p. XIII.

⁹ Y. Tuan, *Space and Place. The Perspective of Experience*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2001 (1977), p. 8.

¹⁰ F. Turner, "Cultivating the American Garden", in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, C. Glotfelty – H. Fromm ed, The University of Georgia Press, Athens 1996, p. 45.

settlers had a destructive interaction with the land”¹¹ as a consequence of the conception of nature either as mother or maid, which implied “the ambivalent and nostalgic desires either to return to a ‘nurturing’, ‘female’ landscape or to possess a presumably ‘virginal’ wilderness”¹². In *The Land Before Her* instead, as the title suggests, Kolodny focuses on women’s writing about the frontier experience, “women’s private responses to the successive American frontiers [...] to trace a tradition of women public statements of the West”¹³. Inspired by Kolodny’s researches, Lawrence Buell wonders what happens when we try to conceive American literary naturism from a very different subject position – say that of the pioneer woman: “At once the cult of wilderness becomes demystified and an alternative, gynocentric paradigm suggests itself: domestic, garden-oriented, critical of the slovenliness and aggressivity of a wilderness experience as portrayed in the literature of the frontier heroism”¹⁴.

Kolodny finds out that women shared their husbands’ and fathers’ economic motives behind emigration, and they dreamed of transforming the wilderness, too. But their emphases was different:

Avoiding for a time male assertions of a rediscovered Eden, women claimed the frontiers as a potential sanctuary for an idealized domesticity. Massive exploitation and alteration of the continent do not seem to have been part of women’s fantasies. They dreamed, more modestly, of locating a home and a familial human community within a cultivated garden¹⁵.

Women’s gardens manifest the potential of relational connections with the land that are based on appreciation and care, an attitude of non violence and respect of a more domestic wilderness.

The words quoted in the title of the essay are the very beginning of *Black Soil* when Nell Connor is travelling together with two children and her husband on a high wagon to reach their land in North Western Iowa. Her first reaction is that of an “initial reluctance”¹⁶ towards a land that is so different from her New England town and whose main trait is to be “so far, far from any signs of life. It was hours, days since the railroad terminal – the last connection with civilization”¹⁷. The first “fantasy”, to use Kolodny’s word, through which Nell “comes to know and act upon”¹⁸ that strange and unknown landscape is that of the garden; not a human conceived garden but the spontaneous, indigenous garden of western

¹¹ T. Wreder, “Barbara Kingslover’s *Animal Dreams*: Ecofeminist Subversion of Western Dream”, in *Feminist Ecocriticism: Environment, Women and Literature*, D.A. Vakoch ed., Lexington Books, Lanham 2012, p. 42.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ A. Kolodny, *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontier, 1630-1860*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 1984, p. XI.

¹⁴ Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, p. 25.

¹⁵ Kolodny, *The Land Before Her*, p. XIII.

¹⁶ Kolodny, *The Land Before Her*, p. IX.

¹⁷ J. Donovan, *Black Soil*, The Stratford Company, Boston 1930, p. 1.

¹⁸ Kolodny, *The Land Before Her*, p. XII.

prairies: "Stretches apparently all blue and patches of pink beckoned to them. They were making a road through flowers [...]. It *was* a world of flowers"¹⁹. Colors, perfumes, the symmetry and arrangements of flowers are the elements of the wild garden that Nell constantly observes from inside her house on the threshold of a door or through a window, or when she is directly immersed in the grass as if in her own words she were "swallowed in those palpitating grasses"²⁰. What is clear from Nell's descriptions of the space around her is that she is not in the condition either of getting thoroughly to know the garden, nor of being able to control it. Nell is not "planting gardens in these wilderness places"²¹, she is instead offered a "ready-made garden"²² that is at its core totally independent of her, that flourishes in Spring and vanishes in Winter, a garden often incomprehensible, ultimately wild. The relation that Nell establishes with the natural world is one of mystery and the very first adjective that she uses to describe the Iowan landscape is "elusive"²³, as if unconsciously knowing from the start of being unable to go beyond the initial pleasant garden, unable to truly decipher the natural world around her: "The prairie [unrolled] before her to the end of her vision, assuming now its elusive contrasts: here a flash of bluish green, there an iridescent silver – and on all sides shifting, mysterious shadows. Mystery! And what mystery in its keeping?"²⁴.

Nell's reading of the landscape around her in terms of uncultivated garden both confirms and expands Kolodny's argument. As anticipated by Kolodny, Nell does dream of creating a new home for her family in the West with the difference that her home will not be set in a "cultivated garden" but in the unconventional garden offered them by Iowan prairies. This garden retains the beauty, the variety of flowers and colors of the cultivated garden and it presents to the eye such a visual harmony which, Nell declares, "dazzled the eye and gladdened the heart"²⁵. However, unlike the cultivated garden symbolically conceived as a mapped, limited and controlled space, the garden of the Iowan prairies is unknown, potentially unlimited and out of control, which explains the sense of mystery and elusiveness Nell feels when confronting this space.

Although not the one conceived by Kolodny, the garden of *Black Soil* implies a relation with the land based on appreciation, care and respect. In front of a spectacular and majestic natural landscape Nell is able to praise its beauty and, at the same time, to accept nature's independence. From her window or her door Nell is lost in the contemplation of nature and gazes at it in awe: she is struck by nature's beauty but at the same time she is impressed by, and partly afraid of, its indifferent strength.

Confirming Kolodny's reading, what is surely to be found in *Black Soil* is a dream of home, of locating a familial human community, if not within a cultivated garden, within

¹⁹ Donovan, *Black Soil*, p. 2.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

²¹ Kolodny, *The Land Before Her*, p. XIII.

²² *Ibidem.*

²³ Donovan, *Black Soil*, p. 1.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

the indigenous garden of the prairies. Nell is looking for the possibility of being accommodated in nature and trying to live in it more in the sense of surviving than in the idea of utopian harmony. On the same high wagon mentioned before Nell's daughter, exhausted from the long journey, says to her mother "Let's go home, Mom"²⁶. Watching the infinite landscape around her Nell's first preoccupation is to locate the spot of her new house: "Somewhere here among those grasses would be home. Where?"²⁷. This is a worry that will be Nell's constant companion all along her story. The principal goal of Nell's adventure West is to create a home for her children and a community around this home so that her children might have better opportunities for the future. To be able to transform an unknown space into a place related to herself as asked by the initial question, Nell needs to transform 'space' into 'place' considering the two concepts as defined by Yi-Fu Tuan's book *Space and Place. The Perspective of Experience*. Tuan declares that the ideas of space and place require each other for definition, 'space' being more abstract, undifferentiated than place and more related to movement, openness, freedom and threat while 'place' being related to knowledge and value, stability and security, and pause at the end of the journey: "What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value. [...] Furthermore, if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place"²⁸.

At the beginning of the story and even before, in the flashbacks of the novel, the Iowan prairies are an indefinite space in the West, a space the Connors simply cross to reach their land. The location where Dutch Fred leaves them has all the features of Tuan's space: it's free, uninhabited and so open that Nell can't see any change in the scene around her: "she looked to the east – sky and grass; to the west – grass and sky."²⁹ It is also an intimidating and terrifying country where the natural phenomena are violent and indomitable and where Indians might appear at any time out of nowhere: "if you value your life don't cross the Sioux... Indians!"³⁰.

The transition from space to place starts already in the first pages of the novel, when the movement of the Connors through the West comes to a halt, giving the chance to that precise location to be transformed into a place in Tuan's words: "As Nell stood in the unfinished house, a square patch of blue sky formed a roof. She untied the lavender poke bonnet. 'Let's stay here, Tim'"³¹. Nell Connor is exhausted from the long journey nonetheless she takes the decision to stop at their new unfinished house and to turn down Dutch Fred's offer to find a shelter in his house.

Nell's adjustment to the new land is a long and painful process that includes several aspects through which, at the end of the story, the prairies could be defined in terms of "knowledge and value, stability and security", the traits Tuan associates with place. The

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁸ Y. Tuan. *Space and Place. The Perspective of Experience*, p. 6.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

first way through which Nell tries to come to terms with the upsetting landscape around her is through personification. The prairies become an important character in the story to which Nell attributes human qualities and addresses to especially in moments of great discomfort or sudden hope for a prosperous future. From the steps of her house Nell hears “the awakening prairies”³², she sees them coming back to life when “the snow which had been strangling the prairie [is] forced to release one foothold after another, to give up, to disappear”³³ or equally losing their battle against the advancing winter and “bow[ing]”³⁴ to it.

The bond between Nell and the prairies increases in strength when Nell starts to wander through the prairies and to take pleasure in them: “she walked across the prairies and experienced a sense of freedom”³⁵. The initial solitude Nell feels in the prairies because of the lack of inhabitants is then transformed into “a luxury of being alone”³⁶ when she has the chance to slip “her feet into Tim’s boots [and] walk out on the clear path”³⁷. With the advancing of the story Nell plants her roots in the land which becomes her own not only when she manages to develop a bond with that space, but when she feels so sure to let her children move freely in the prairies, which makes her realize that through their explorations her children “unknowingly had become a part”³⁸ of that landscape.

With a mixture of fascination and hatred Nell finally and definitely accepts her home in the barren prairie just as her last born daughter Alice – “the baby-born in grasshopper times”³⁹ – does. More than this, Nell herself becomes the prairies as she acquires some of their traits: “In her face, [her German neighbor] saw [...] the calm of the prairie twilight”⁴⁰. The transition from space to place is now completed.

A visual symbol of this transition can be found in the images of Nell’s two houses, respectively at the beginning and at the end of the novel. The construction the Connors find awaiting them on their land is hardly a house, having more the aspect of a shanty: “In the midst of the green ahead there was a white speck like the sail of a boat far out at sea. [...] It was a house. [...] Where was the roof? There were only two sides boarded”⁴¹. The sense of loneliness, of precariousness of being at the end of the world, “at the mercy of the billowy prairie”⁴² of this first shelter gives way to the safety and solidity of a “spacious ten-room house”⁴³ set in a mapped area with a name and train connections. The wild, mysterious

³² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

³⁷ *Ibidem.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 315.

“ready-made garden prairies”⁴⁴ that surrounded the first shanty have been turned into cultivated land and into sceneries modeled by a human hand: “Shade from the tall cottonwoods filled the yard. Flowerbeds bordered with whitewashed stones. The white fence. The barn. The new house”⁴⁵.

Has Nell managed to avoid, in this transition, the two extremes of “the polluter” and “the ecology freak” that Frederick Turner saw as a risk? In tune with Kolodny’s conclusions, Nell shares her husband economic motives and she dreams of altering the wilderness. At the end of the book pioneers have definitely reshaped nature, and human presence is heavily visible in the landscape marked with unattractive scars of barbed wires:

Spring came again to the prairie, but the hues and tints of its illimitable green were defined by sharp corners – barbed wire had made a checker board of the country. It was settlers now who determined where should be a square of bluish-green oats, or a rectangle of greenish-blue hayland. Along the railroad track lush grass and flowers [...] again found footing in the moist ‘dump’; but the pebbly ridge defied vegetation and traced a white scar across the green⁴⁶.

Nell’s goal, however, is that of transforming and preserving nature at the same time; “the decent living”⁴⁷ Nell is dreaming for her children implies a home amid flowery prairies, not in a devastated landscape. Such an attitude could be an alternative to “the polluter” and “the ecology freak”, an anticipation of Aldo Leopold’s theory of a “land ethic” as formulated at the end of *A Sand County Almanac* according to which “human beings are neither more nor less than citizens”⁴⁸ on the Earth:

A land ethic changes the role of *Homo Sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such [...] A land ethic, then, reflects the existence of an ecological conscience, and this in turn reflects a conviction of individual responsibility for the health of land⁴⁹.

An admiration for nature’s beauty characterizes all Nell’s descriptions of prairies. In moments of utter despair, when starvation threatens her children in the period of grasshopper devastation, Nell seems to share her German neighbor’s persuasion that the almost unbearable life on the frontier is due to a kind of original sin committed by pioneers, a sin that dooms their lives, transforms nature into an enemy and leads humanity to madness and suicide: “The grasshoppers had become a symbol, an army starving out the settlers. It was war [...]. Everything was wrong! Perhaps this Iowa should never have been settled! The

⁴⁴ Kolodny, *The Land Before Her*, p. XIII.

⁴⁵ Donovan, *Black Soil*, p. 319.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 313.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁴⁸ G. Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, Routledge, New York 2004, p. 72.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 171, 186.

plowing upon its original beauty was no doubt a desecration. If that were the case, he was powerless to remedy it: everyone was powerless⁵⁰.

The destruction of nature's beauty and fertility would finally make the home and community Nell is dreaming of impossible. “For pioneer women, in other words, the proverbial Garden of the West pointed not simply to a fertile landscape, but to a complex integration of home and community made possible by that fertility”⁵¹. What Nell is ultimately trying to do is to ensure a home for her children amid nature, which consequently can't be conceived as mere commodity to be abused but as a “community to which we belong”⁵², a resource “to [be] use[d] with love and respect”⁵³ to avoid its destruction. Nell, then, “creates” her home by caring and respecting the real space, as only through caring and respecting can she assure a prosperous future for her children in a fertile and bountiful nature.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁵¹ Kolodny, *The Land Before Her*, p. 12.

⁵² A. Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac. With Essays on Conservation*, Oxford University Press, New York 2001, p. 21.

⁵³ *Ibidem*.



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