A Place to Inscribe All Places:
The Spatial Imaginations of Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams

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Abstract

This paper adopts a comparative approach to the poetics of Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams, exploring the contrasting conceptions of geographical space and national identity these writers formulate in their respective works: Stevens in a transatlantic context, and Williams in an intra-American one. The discussion attends to Wallace Stevens’s understanding of space, specifically as evidenced in his poems about Ireland—a country he never visits in person, but which he still envisions in material, mythological, and poetically catalysing terms. This paper relates such a circumstance to Stevens’s correspondence with the Irish writer and curator Thomas MacGreevy (among others), as well as to the American writer’s theorization of imaginative and geographical space throughout his work. The second section focuses on William Carlos Williams’s efforts to incorporate what he perceives as the facts and dominant themes of Native American experience into his later poetry. Although engaging problematic notions of ethnic and gendered alterity, in contrast to Stevens Williams, he challenges any symbiosis between national and placial identity, invoking images of Native American experience as a means of exposing the faultlines that define American landscapes and localities—from New Jersey to New Mexico.

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T.S. Eliot, among others, as the American modernists who stayed at home—Stevens fashioning vistas of aesthetic and metaphysical speculation from the security (or perhaps, as Ragg suggests, “the confines”) of his home and office in Hartford, Connecticut (3), and Williams, the perennial doctor-on-call, grounding his art in the visceral and vernacular streetscapes of urban New Jersey. By choosing to focus on his Irish work in particular, however, this discussion traces at least one creatively vital transatlantic thread running through the greater tapestry of Stevens’s later work. It also serves to dispel long-standing interpretations of his poetry as, what Bilge Han terms, the “solipsistic expressions of a self-enclosed aestheticism” (146), by demonstrating, in specific detail, the literary and epistolary circuits of exchange out of which Stevens’s poetics of spatial meditation (and mediation) are drawn. Similarly, the case study from Williams’s work examined in this paper may remind readers of the politically complex and ethically probing sense of Americanness per se to be found in many of his later landscape poems, including *Paterson*. When “I say that I cannot enter his work,” Robert Lowell remarks of Williams, “I am almost saying that I cannot enter America,” for he “loves America excessively, as if it were the truth and the subject... His flowers rustle by the superhighways and pick up all our voices” (*Collected Prose* 42). This discussion both extends and complicates Lowell’s interpretation of Williams’s work, highlighting the elder poet’s vexed understanding of the material and discursive violence that frames American history and space, while also unveiling the problematic racial politics that colour his so-called “flowers [that] rustle by the superhighways” (42).

An additional rationale for the comparative outlook adopted in this paper is that, while both Stevens and Williams interrogate concepts of place, national identity, and poetic utterance as interlinked discourses in their later works, specifically, they do so each in the awareness of the other’s somewhat differing approach to such questions. Writing to Byron Vazakas in November 1945, for example, Williams remarks of his own poem, “A Place (Any Place) To Transcend All Places,” that it is intended as a retort to Stevens’s “Description without Place,” “which I didn't like at all” (*Collected Poems II* 476). Affirming his famous credo, “No ideas / but in things,” and his insistence, in 1944, indeed, that the “song” of the times be “made of / particulars” (5), Williams writes in the poem of “New York” as being “built [of] grass and weeds”:

    a museum of looks
    across a breakfast
    table; subways of dreams;
    towers of divisions
    from thin pay envelopes.
    What else is it? And what
    else can it be?

“The eyes,” Williams concludes, are “far quicker than the mind” (164-65)—positing a poetics of observation and material immersion against the mode of meditative abstraction exemplified in Stevens’s piece. “Description,” Stevens thus contends,
[is] an artificial thing that exists,
In its own seeming, plainly visible,

Yet not too closely the double of our lives,
Intenser than any actual life could be... (*Collected Poetry and Prose* 301-02)

By virtue of this materially transcendent quality, moreover, Stevens goes on to imagine (in a High Romantic affirmation of the poet’s own powers) “the invention of a nation in a phrase” (301-02). Stevens envisions a poetry that functions above place per se, beyond “any actual life,” and yet one that is capable, by the intensity of its own utterance, of conjuring a nation. Williams in the piece above, of course, insists instead on actuality, a groundedness in place, as being key to any meaning or interest that the poem might hold—a manifestation, perhaps, of what Stevens famously describes as Williams’s “passion for the anti-poetic” (“Preface” 70), a literary distinction to which Williams, in turn, is resolutely opposed. “It’s all one to me,” Williams contends some years later, “the anti-poetic is not something to enhance the poetic—it’s all one piece” (*I Wanted to Write a Poem* 52).

This paper takes such an apparently decisive divergence in creative approaches as its starting-point not so as to iterate its critical conclusions in advance, but primarily for the purpose of demonstrating in the analysis that follows how the style and concerns of each writer are in fact more complex than the literary exchanges above suggest. As the case studies adopted here elucidate, and as the discussion below makes plain, Stevens’s later poems on occasion actively theorise and depend on the kind of material basis for spatial imagining that Williams advocates, while Williams’s own work can be seen, if not to invent “a nation in a phrase,” as Stevens suggests, then at least to probe and problematize ideas of nationhood by poetic means—each figure thus partially accommodating the other’s opposing aesthetic stance and approach, despite initial appearances.

I

Turning to Stevens’s Irish poems, then, it appears that everything the American writer says about Ireland is indeed description without place: he writes of Irish landscapes and locations without first-hand experience of them himself (*Collected Poetry and Prose* 302). This is seemingly no impediment to Stevens—who deploys images of Ireland in his work as a means of exploring the mythic origins of human thought, and also as analogues of the aesthetic universality that poetry, as he sees it, should strive towards. “The stars are washing up from Ireland,” he writes, “The sound. . . . Comes from a great distance and is heard” (389). In Stevens’s hands, Irish landscapes are refigured as symbols of ancient time and the mystical transcendence of daily and ordinary experience. So, after receiving a postcard from County Clare, sent by his Irish-American correspondent James Johnson Sweeney, Stevens portrays the
“cliffs of Moher” as standing “At the spirit’s base . . . rising out of the mist / Above the real” (427). Similarly, he imagines elsewhere the stars in the night sky over Pennsylvania as arriving from the “Gaeled and fitful-fangled darknesses” of the West of Ireland, “Made suddenly luminous” (390).

Importantly, it is partly due to this combination of physical distance from Ireland and a presumed interpretive access to images of Irish landscapes, that Stevens’s creative approach has been classified by critics as a touristic and essentialising one. Daniel Tobin thus interprets Stevens’s Irish poems as the “transformation of a distant place” into a familiar “emblem of America,” and one “worthy of Norman Rockwell” (35), while Tara Stubbs likewise interprets Stevens as “reconfiguring the Irish landscape as an ideological abstraction,” and so of leaving “Ireland... both all-powerful and impotent, both pregnant with imaginative potential and denuded of the roots of that potential” (120). However, Stevens’s Irish poems are notable primarily for their relation to his correspondence with the Irish writer and curator Thomas MacGreevy (among others), and, hence, for their concise indication of the palimpsestic understanding of poetic space per se that his creative practice in general both advocates and engages—the verbal map of the poem arising from and then reimagining the literal traces of Stevens’s own relationship to Ireland, however far-flung this may at first appear.

Between 1949 and 1955, Stevens and McGreevy posted poetry collections, books of criticism, articles, photographs, postcards, and even portraits of themselves, as well as dozens of letters, in which each shared his reflections on poetry and poets, on national news and international affairs, and on his own memories and daily routines. The aspect of the relationship between the two men that is most pertinent to the discussion here however, centres on Stevens’s seemingly distinctive capacity—in contrast to McGreevy—to adopt such ephemera and personal details from their correspondence as material for his poetry. Indeed, as Peter Brazeau records in Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered (1977), when questioned by James Johnson Sweeney as to how he could legitimately write poems about Ireland, or anywhere, without having been there himself, Stevens reportedly replies, “that he had a feeling through McGreevy... [an] idea of Ireland,” from the letters and materials that he received from his friend (228).

Stevens actually composes two poems, “Tom McGreevy, in America, Thinks of Himself as a Boy” and “The Westwardness of Everything” (later composited into a single poem of two parts, “Our Stars Come from Ireland”), as direct responses to McGreevy’s portrait of his childhood home in letters and to two pieces of McGreevy’s own, “Recessional” and “Homage to Hieronymus Bosch”—both singled out admiringly from the collection of poetry his Irish friend sent to him. McGreevy’s “Homage” contains the lines,

High above the Bank of Ireland
unearthly music sounded,
passing westwards... (Schreibman 104)

which Stevens adopts in the voice of his poem’s persona, to read:
Over the top of the Bank of Ireland,
The wind blows quaintly
Its thin-stringed music,
As he heard it in Tarbert. (*Collected Poetry and Prose* 389).

Stevens’s invented persona effectively inhabits the recorded memories and reimagines the written words which Stevens himself has received by correspondence from McGreevy in reality. Rather than criticise or dismiss the end products of this creative process however, I wish to suggest here that such procedures in fact affirm Stevens’s view that poems are best considered “without an author,” meaning that they have, rather, “a separate author, a different poet, / An accretion from ourselves” (274-75). On examination, in short, Stevens’s Irish poems may be seen to embody and act out in microcosm that creative praxis he outlines in his poetics as a whole. “Real and unreal are two in one,” Stevens thus observes in an “Ordinary Evening in New Haven”:

...New Haven
Before and after one arrives, or, say,

Bergamo on a postcard, Rome after dark,
Sweden described, Salzburg with shaded eyes
Or Paris in conversation at a café.

This endlessly elaborating poem
Displays the theory of poetry,
As the life of poetry... (414-15)

The “endlessly elaborating poem” Stevens refers to here is not so much his own written composition as it is the multiply manifested experience of place in modern life, which individuals access in the intimacy of café conversation, or through that very distance which a postcard or poem can serve to span. As Schreibman reminds us, indeed, it is in this sense that McGreevy himself can remark in 1960 that “[Stevens] was doing me the honour of thinking of himself as a Tom of America” (145). For Stevens, in approaching “Real and unreal” as “two in one,” the poem cannot simply repeat its sources, but, like place itself, must constitute an experience of the world that can be made as well as merely undergone—as his Irish poems also imply:
Out of him I made Mal Bay
And not a bald and tasselled saint.
What would the water have been,
Without that that he makes of it? (Collected Poetry and Prose 389)

In addition to alluding to the actual context of transatlantic crossing out of which the poem itself has been formed (“What would the water have been...”), Stevens here seems to suggest that an imagination of place must be grounded in a traceable understanding of place, no matter how tenuous. Significantly, in his poem, “The Irish Cliffs of Moher,” he tracks a similar perceptual terrain, acknowledging that the poem and the postcard are “not landscape” itself, but rather form two parts of a “likeness,” which nevertheless partakes of the history “before speech” that they describe, by rendering communicable the “earth / and sea and air” of that landscape (Collected Poetry and Prose 427). Or, as he puts it in “A Postcard from the Volcano,” “what we said of it became // a part of what it is” (129)—an apothegm to which the content and compositional background of Stevens’s Irish poems testify in practice.

On this note, it may be apposite to observe that similar procedures of mythical envisioning and imaginatively reductionist cartography to those for which Stevens has received much negative criticism are contemporaneously adopted in Ireland by artists and cultural figures, not least McGreevy himself—a fact which has solicited scant academic commentary. Seeing “the worn cliffs towering up over the Atlantic,” Stevens can remark to one correspondent, “[is] like a gust of freedom, a return to the spacious, solitary world in which we used to exist” (Letters 761). McGreevy can likewise declare: “I believe everything I’m told about the beauty of Connemara,” never having visited it in person, “and [about] the Gaelic poetry and legend of it that I know are absorbing” (114-15). In his correspondence with Stevens, in other words, McGreevy’s sense of Connemara as an appealingly ancient elsewhere is just as appreciatively essentialist on an intranational level as his friend’s response is from a supposedly American perspective.

Certainly, the comparison of the two poets’ respective images of Connemara serves to problematize the charge levelled against Stevens of portraying Ireland as a kind of ideological abstraction. The point is that if Stevens’s imagination of Irish geography is indeed as creatively touristic and imaginatively imperialistic as critics claim, then this condition is not reducible to Stevens’s own national bias or self-conception as an American poet per se—contrary to what Tobin suggests, for example—but rather may be one among many instances of a trans- and intracultural imagination of place, which Irish cosmopolites like McGreevy apparently cultivate with the same readiness as American poets.

This qualification, of course, does not dispel the perhaps troublingly acquisitive nature of those imaginative tendencies that critics identify (if perhaps in misleading terms) in the case of Stevens’s poems. Indeed, although recognised as one of the few perceptively appreciative readers of McGreevy’s poetry during his lifetime, Samuel Beckett is notably critical of McGreevy on exactly the same score. In a review written of his friend’s monograph on the paintings of Jack B. Yeats, Beckett suggests that McGreevy’s fault as a critic is that of assuming
a priori characteristics and values in what he terms “the local substance” (97)—of seeing in the
work of an artist not so much an array of aesthetic attainments and weaknesses, as, for Beckett, a
necessarily reductionist image of the place and nation from which he hails, and locating the
creative merit of the work therein. “The national aspects of Mr Yeats’s genius,” Beckett writes,
“have, I think, been over-stated [by McGreevy], and for motives not always remarkable for their
aesthetic purity” (96-97). For Beckett (as for Joyce before him), in the prescriptive imagining of
artistic value according to nationalistic criteria, Irish artists attain not an acuter sense of the
modern sublime so much as a shallow parochialism of intent and praxis that verges on the
ridiculous. By Beckett’s logic, indeed, Stevens’s poetic appropriation of Ireland as a mythic
image of place per se, in “The Irish Cliffs of Moher,” may perhaps be less creatively incursive a
gesture than the appropriation of Ireland by the Irish themselves. “To admire painting on other
than aesthetic grounds,” Beckett asserts of McGreevy's critical approach, is “uncalled for” (96-
97).

Beckett adopts this somewhat obdurate stance against McGreevy ultimately in order to
disclaim the notion of national art as a valid category of aesthetic experience and endeavour. The
question is one of particular pertinence to the discussion of the McGreevy-Stevens relationship,
not only for the debatably essentialist versions of place and community which each figure
indulges in person and portrays in their artistic practice, but also because the very fact of their
correspondence points beyond a solely national network of reference and communication by
which artists can influence and attend to each other’s creative work and opinions. On the one
hand, Benedict Anderson’s theorisation of the nation as an “imagined community” seems to be
corroborated by the staunchness of McGreevy’s cultural nationalism. It is also corroborated by
the willingness of Stevens to gain poetic access to a universal image of place in his conflation of
what he sees as a definitively Irish space and memory with his persona’s own, in “Our Stars
Come from Ireland.” National communities, as Anderson argues after all, “are to be
distinguished not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (6).
On the other hand, however, Anderson’s account (like Beckett's critique) of nationhood arguably
risks misdirection from the outset, in that a community cannot be imagined without, first or
simultaneously, being experienced in complex ways. The idea of a place and the imagination of a
community, as Stevens’ creative practice demonstrates, only become meaningful at a theoretical
level through their adaptability to manifold circumstances, and their consequent manifestation in
various material forms. Beckett’s wariness of, and Anderson’s seeming obliviousness to the
“local substance,” in other words, both overlook the point that the conceptual force and inspiring
power of a general idea—such as “art,” or “nationhood,” or “Ireland”—will frequently depend
on the potential inherence of that idea, in however refracted a form, in multiple areas of
experience.

This last seems to be Stevens’s position, at least in that his lack of an immediately tangible
relation to Ireland is consciously counterpoised by the creative and personal links that he seeks
out and attains in his friendship with McGreevy and other correspondents—as the remarks above
suggest. More generally, and as we have seen, Stevens continually refuses to accept the
distinction between a theoretical conception of the world and an experience of the world’s own process. Rather, he chooses both, involving each in the other in the very structure of the poem, and by such means conveys a sense of that “complicate, the amassing harmony” in which his subject materials invariably participate (Collected Poetry and Prose 348). As his Irish poems demonstrate in concentrated form, Stevens’s poetics are such that, in order to accurately conceptualise modernity, the categories of identification which we deploy—such as the national and the natural, the local and the foreign, the imagined and the known—must be conceived of in unison, as elements and expressions of each other. Hence, he insists that in poetry, it is “not a choice / Between but of”:

... [so] he chose to include the things
That in each other are included, the whole,
The complicate, the amassing harmony. (348)

For Stevens, the poet always makes and enacts this choice, moreover, in a situation of inherent complexity, wherein:

The squirming facts exceed the squamous mind,
If one may say so. And yet relation appears,
A small relation expanding like the shade
Of a cloud on sand, a shape on the side of a hill. (195)

In contrast to Williams’s interpretation of “Description without Place,” the phenomenon of physical process and material existence here is in fact the one commonality for Stevens that connects disparate objects and experiences. Furthermore, the very modernity of the mid-century, transatlantic moment in which he writes his poems (and encounters the work of others like McGreevy) is such that “relation” appears with a new persistence and intensity. “It means a lot to me to know a man in Dublin,” Stevens thus remarks to his Irish friend, “and to find that it becomes as minutely significant as the map of Connecticut” (Stevens 827), while McGreevy, in turn, can declare that whereas before his correspondence with Stevens he had had no compulsion to visit America, “now I have an America and if I ever go . . . I have somewhere to go” (18).

In this last respect, the epistolary and poetic correspondence between Stevens and McGreevy arguably dramatizes in detail what Stevens’s late Ariel persona proposes in the abstract:

It was not important that they survive.
What mattered was they should bear
Some lineament or character,
Some affluence, if only half-perceived,
In the poverty of their words,
Of the planet of which they were a part. (Collected Poetry and Prose 451)

As we see here, for Stevens, the poem’s purpose is not only to speak, or show, or imitate “some lineament or character” of the world, but to do so by bearing these features as part of its own intuitive structure—a task which words alone seem incapable of fulfilling, by Stevens’s own admission, and yet one to which he actively and openly dedicates himself in practice, as his Irish writings demonstrate. In their thematic range and in their formal composition, pieces such as “Our Stars Come from Ireland” and “The Irish Cliffs of Moher” are multi-sourced and polyphonic, serving as material palimpsests of historical experience—in that they integrate the recorded memories, personal ideas, and projected images of others with the author’s own and, in this way, mediate those aesthetic complexities that contemporaries like Williams, and later academic scholars, have objected to in Stevens’s work at large. To consider these elements together, Stevens suggests, is to see the modern world more truly, if perhaps more strange, and to realise that:

The whole habit of the mind if changed by them,
These Gaeled and fitful-fangled darknesses
Made suddenly luminous, themselves a change,
An east in their compelling westwardness,

Themselves an issue as at an end, as if
There was an end at which in a final change,
When the whole habit of mind was changed,
The ocean breathed out morning in one breath. (390)

For Stevens, then, the breath of the foreign, like the air of the past, may be less perishable and more present to us than we realise. Stevens’s theorisation, his world-rendered sense of world, is one in which the distant and the different remain as such, but alter, too; in which an era’s erasures are part-expressions of time itself; in which, in short, though “the honey of heaven may or may not come / that of earth both comes and goes at once” (Collected Poetry and Prose 12). If an adequate imagination is what we are seeking—of the past, of modernity, or of place itself—Stevens clarifies this desire above, with a lyric coda that might itself be the insight sought. Stevens suggests that both the changes of history and the channels of life, whether they are immediately visible or invisibly in process, whether they are known from inference, from tangible traces, or from daily experience, that these often imponderable distances are themselves affected by our “merely living as and where we live” (285). Such a framework as this paper adopts indicates that we cannot interpret such apprehensions solely in metaphysical terms, but should rather acknowledge the precise material contexts and the traceable network of personal,
epistolary, as well as imaginative commitments on Stevens’s part from which they emerge—as his Irish poems exemplify.

II

Turning now to Williams’s late literary efforts to address the discursive, historical, and material discriminations experienced by Native Americans, it should perhaps be acknowledged that one of the most striking aspects of Williams’s exploration of such issues in his poetry is his effort to do so at all—an impulse largely absent from the work of his high modernist contemporaries (including Stevens). Williams’s awareness of the continually violated and suppressed importance of Native American cultures in American life in fact has deep roots. “History begins for us with murder and enslavement, not with discovery,” he observes with evident anger in 1925, “we are not Indians, but we are men of their world... Fierce and implacable we kill them, but their spirit is master” (In the American Grain 39-40). In a similar mode, and partly in response to seeing first-hand the living conditions in certain reservation areas over the course of a road trip he takes in 1947, in the collection The Clouds (1948), Williams issues a number of politically searing evocations of indigenous hardship, which draw a line of association between contemporary Native American deprivation and the systematic crimes committed against such communities in the past.

In the poem “Navajo,” Williams’s image of a Native American woman walking the desert thus serves not just as an exposure of the harsh conditions with which his chosen figure must grapple, but also as an interrogation of the poem’s own position amid the discourses of church, state, and national imagining that frame her. From the beginning, Williams inscribes the poem’s descriptive concerns with a self-searching reflexivity, sounding an admonitory note to himself and his reading audience in parenthesis:

(Keep Christ out
of this—and
his mountains:
Sangre de Cristo
red rocks that make
the water run
blood-red) (Collected Poems II 150-51)

As Williams’s dismissal of “Christ” and “his mountains” suggests, even the geographical language available to situate the experience of the Navajo woman is, in a sense, a falsity and imposition—a residue of that “blood-red” history of religious and ecological colonisation that forms so central a concern of his earlier book, In the American Grain (first edition, 1925). As Williams notes in that work, and as his impassioned apostrophe above implies, America was “thickly populated with a peaceful folk when Christ-over found them. But the orgy of blood that
followed, no man has written. We are the slaughterers. It is the tortured soul of our world” (41). By contrast, and although potentially ineffable, Williams takes it upon himself as a matter of literary necessity to write what “no man has written,” the excised chapters of his nation's history.

In this sense, “Navajo” seems quite provocatively to fulfil Williams’s understanding of poetry as “the lifting of an environment to expression,” reinforcing his contention that the poem itself be considered therefore as “a social instrument” (Selected Essays 286). The “red woman” and “the / desert animating” her appear as mutual, near-symbiotic elements of the overall picture—a picture formulated to convey the historically consequential realities of indigenous experience. As such, of course, the poem also posits the central female figure as a generic category—exactly that feature of Stevens’s work Williams objects to elsewhere—trading on essentialist and reductive tropes of Native American identity to bring the historical and material environment in question into view. “Red woman,” Williams writes,

[I see you] walking  
extinct, the  
 desert animating  
the blood to walk  
except by choice  
through  
 the pale green  
of the starveling sage (Collected Poems II 151)

Williams focuses on the Navajo woman through a lens of problematic assumptions, invoking images of indigenous dignity/savagery that are as mystifying as they are prejudicial—constituting, in the words of Bradley Reed Howard, “a political act of alienation” that arguably represents “the construction of [an] object, rather than the apprehension of the Other” (12). By Williams’s circular symbolic logic, the woman is representative of Navajo experience because she is a “red squaw,” her supposed redness both an inescapable fact, for Williams, and an elusive poetic truth.

The main point is that Williams’s sympathy for the Navajo woman may be instinctive, but it is also highly sensationalised—a factor which explains the tension that persists as the poem unfolds between the cultural assumptions Williams activates and the material perceptions he attempts to convey. Clearly conscious of what Dee Brown summarises as “the poverty, the squalor and the hopelessness of the modern Indian” experience (xvi), Williams similarly relates these conditions to a larger narrative of colonisation and racial violence against Native American tribes, but in doing so betrays a superficial (and racially charged) conception of Native Americans, who appear in his work more as iconographic compositions than as articulate agents. Curiously, perhaps, in this instance Williams appears to be conscious to some degree of the contradictions inherent in his aesthetic method. “I suspected,” Williams writes,
[that] I should remember
you this way:
walking the brain
eyes cast down
to escape ME! (Collected Poems II 151)

As this extract implies, Williams is at least somewhat troubled by the conditioned, discursively damaging perspective he deploys in the poem, and hence aware of the implicated role he himself occupies in the system of oppressive relations that render the woman’s supposed “escape” into the desert so striking.

Just as “Navajo” traces the interactions of race and history, landscape and language, in an attempt to symbolise Native American identity in poetic terms, “Graph,” maps out the complex interconnection between the various power relations the poem makes visible and Williams’s own authorial and spectatorial desires. In both their general theme and particular details, the poems stand in symbolic dialogue with one another. While, in the first piece, the Navajo woman walks the desert “paralleling the highway” with “eyes cast down / to escape ME!” (Collected Poems II 151), in “Graph,” Williams encounters a second woman, “a half-breed Cherokee,” waiting on the roadside. In contrast to the first Native American figure Williams describes, in “Graph,” the woman stands in a position of implied sexual access, her gestures suggesting exactly that legibility of expression and contact that Williams has strained after and failed to attain in “Navajo.” Of the second woman Williams thus writes that she

tried to thumb a ride
out of Tulsa, standing there

with a bunch of wildflowers
in her left hand
pressed close
just below the belly (152)

On close-reading, of course, Williams’s depiction here of the woman as a “half-breed” trying “to thumb a ride,” with “her left hand / pressed close / just below the belly,” succinctly invokes the history of systemic racism and coercion which frames acts and discourses of miscegenation in general, as well as a sense of personal possessiveness and arousal on Williams’s part.

In this last respect, the Native American woman above is arguably one example of what Williams elsewhere terms the “pure products of America,” representative of a “marriage [with] a dash of Indian blood,” “a girl so desolate / so hemmed round / with disease or murder,” who in her sheer embodiment before the poet’s eyes expresses “with broken // brain the truth about us” (Collected Poems I 218). Like “Elsie” of Williams’s famous segment in Spring and All, the woman here is not just as an embodied figure Williams has encountered in person, but a trope for
the violence and persistence of American life at large—which, for Williams, is a delectable, imagination-straining maelstrom of “promiscuity,” degradation, and “filth” (218-19). The Native American woman above is thus portrayed as a kind of natural decoration by the roadside, among the “wildflowers” that symbolise both their own spatial milieu and Williams’s authorial and sexual desires. The agency, integrity and identity of these “wildflowers,” of course, Williams tends to elide—if not actively to debase, as we have seen. As Kate Schnur remarks, “to express their corporealization,” Williams “relies on” and sometimes reinforces “these bodies' fragmentation, injury and pain” (177). Such a dynamic is neither clear-cut nor consistently negative in Williams’s poems which often acknowledge (as we have seen) their own thematic contradictions.

This is certainly true of Williams’s late long poem, Paterson—perhaps his most thorough attempt to represent, in literary terms, the process of American space per se, in this case his own native New Jersey. Just as Wallace, Stevens views the poem as “an abstraction blooded / as a man by thought” (Collected Poetry and Prose 333), in Paterson, Williams’s eponymous man-like-a-city-and-city-like-a-man sets himself the task of “loaning blood / to the past,” to the forgotten dead and their buried discourses, including those of the historically repressed indigenous tribes in the surrounding area (101). William’s description, in Paterson, of the burning of the local library at the turn of the century—a historical event which also symbolises, in the poem, Williams’s urge for a tearing down of worn-out cultural conventions—features an account of the murder of a group of native Americans, accused of “killing two or three pigs” that had in fact “been butchered by the white men themselves”:

The first of these savages, having received a frightful wound, desired them to permit him to dance the Kinte Kaye, a religious use among them before death; he received, however, so many wounds that he dropped dead. The soldiers then cut strips down the other’s body [while some stood] laughing heartily at the fun... he dancing the Kinte Kaye all the time, [they] mutilated him, and at last cut off his head. (102-03)

The violence and racism recounted with such starkness in this passage of course present a formal reproach to the discourse of national nostalgia in which even Paterson himself occasionally indulges. The uncensored account of past atrocity included here, for example, seems deliberately to contradict the doctor-poet’s imagining elsewhere in the poem of the “Totowa tribe” and their “river-farms resting in / the quiet of those colonial days” (Paterson 193). In contrast, the earlier episode closes with clamour, protest, and impotent grief, as a captive group of “female savages... held up their arms, and in their language exclaimed, ‘For shame! For shame! Such unheard of cruelty was never known, or even thought of, among us’” (103).

As bell hooks has written, “it is difficult not to hear in Standard English always the sound of conquest and slaughter,” an adage that could almost be said to motivate Williams’s exercise in excursive listening here (169). Indeed, if it would be misleading to depict Williams as a postcolonial writer per se, as segments such as this imply that he at the very least engages with a
colonially conscious understanding of American space. This understanding is often matched by an equally visceral perception of the formal inadequacy (and historical complicity) of American English as a mode of expressing such understanding. As Frederic Jameson observes, the sounds of the “Kinte Kaye,” which Williams so insistently funnels from the silence of history to the present moment of the poem’s attention, “punctuate the epic at crucial moments and restore to the record a fearful history of domination and imperialism,” accompanying Paterson as a whole and “subtend[ing] its movement like a great dirge, an expressive music not available in white North American culture” (43).

The prose sequences that occur throughout Paterson—and particularly those dealing with issues of Native American history and enunciation—thus effect what Williams terms “an enforced pause” (Paterson 2). In other words, Paterson’s incorporated historical accounts, implant a politics of redress and acknowledgement into the poem’s progression, as well as highlighting the gap in the register, the deficiency in the accepted discourse with which Williams’s representative poet must contend. If “[t]he language is missing them” and they die “incommunicado,” Williams suggests, then Paterson will lend such figures a hearing: “What do I do? I listen... This is my entire / occupation.” (46). The primary revelation yielded by such concerns, however, is often, as we have seen, that of Williams’s own complicity as a poet in the spatial and discursive silences he is attempting to fill—without success, in the case above.

On the surface, then, Williams’s treatment of American space in these pieces is historically attuned and politically probing, rejecting that “aesthetics of abstraction” for which his friend and rival, Stevens, is famed (Ragg 29). And yet, we find that the more attentively Williams delves into the material details of such space, the more uneasy his discourse becomes. Such a predicament, of course, stands in direct contrast to the creative praxis of Stevens’s Irish poems. These poems set out self-consciously to synthesise the experience of place with its elaborate imagination—projecting images of Ireland, inventing “a nation in a phrase,” by drawing their words and symbols from the landscape and nation that Stevens himself has been given (by McGreevy and others). As such, at the level of composition and form, Stevens may be seen to overlap that creative gulf which Williams, beset by material ineffabilities and difference, continually encounters—and ironically, perhaps, given the latter’s perennial insistence that there can be “No ideas / but in things” (Collected Poems II 5). Williams’s poems of Native American experience give voice to national and spatial disjunctions which they do not (and cannot) resolve. What Williams says of the native space his personae move through with such attentive perception fails to form a part of what it is. The figures he encounters there never become that “accretion from ourselves” which Stevens sought and found in MacGreevy’s postcard-portraits of a distant place—arriving to the American poet as images of elsewhere, willingly given, openly received, and recognised as if from a life inside his own (Collected Poetry and Prose 275).
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