Contemporary Peruvian Women Writers: The Ill-Fated Revolutions of Space

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The work of the writers that I will discuss in this paper reveal the reality of the voiceless members of society and the solidarity that the writers feel or don't feel towards their characters. In these stories, Peruvian women enter gendered geographies available to them through ordinary life. There are intersections of public and private space with the author's imagined space serving as the intermediary crucible in which these women grapple with identities that exist both within post-colonialism and outside of their imagination. The characters, like others in Latin America, teeter on the edge of privilege and power. At dead center of these stories is the Peruvian woman writer grappling with all the ingredients of Latin reality—terrorists, an entrenched power structure, and collective action. Most of all, the authors here construct public and private spaces that may intersect or divide but never fail to test their characters in the mysteries of space, identity, and revolution within a post-colonial Peru.

The writers I have chosen to discuss, Zelideth Chávez, Pilar Dughi, and Carmen Gorriti, create a space in which the characters travel on their way to resistance. For Peruvian women, these boundaries are tightly controlled. While I do not mean this paper to be an in-depth study of gendered geography, using space offers a backdrop, illuminating and highlighting the discussion. Like the backdrop on an outdoor stage, focusing on space as a background provides better visibility of the characters and places them in context, both within and outside of their stories. What we find when we look at space in Peruvian life is a curious mixing of public and private space. The home is the central anchoring point for the Peruvian women in these stories, yet it is not exclusively private space in the sense that we may define that in the United States. Today, over half of the people in Peru are considered poor with eighteen percent in extreme poverty (United States). More startling is the increasing feminization of poverty in which forty-four percent of all women in Peru are considered

poor (United Nations). The home because of necessity is both the place of reproduction and production in an economic sense. The lack of jobs outside the home combined with the fierce entrepreneurial spirit of Peruvians creates tangled intersections between spaces. Just how the rules of power are configured in these spaces offers the characters in these stories new challenges when it comes to resistance and collective action.

In *Gender, Identity, and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies*, Linda McDowell states that "Places are made through power relations which construct the rules which define boundaries. These boundaries are both social and spatial—they define who belongs to a place and who may be excluded, as well as the location or site of the experience" (4). In Zelideth Chávez's story, "La Merciquita," the interplay of power relations has been in existence since Pizarro. The crushing power of the Spaniards and the *mistis*[1] still exists for the character, la Merciquita, a young indigenous girl who is, in reality, a member of an underclass of an underclass. Chávez, the author who is from Puno, a city on the banks of Lake Titicaca, presents in this short story the interplay of power between the *mistis* represented by the narrator and her mother, *la señora grande*, and Merciquita, a ten-year old indigenous girl. For the *mistis*, Andean white settlers, colonialism continues, and the system of the *encomienda*[2] is a way to secure free labor. However, long before Merciquita is delivered to the *mistis*, we see another system of oppression alive and well in her own family.

The story does not reveal whether the taking of Merciquita is a family decision or one made solely by a male member of the family. For it is Merciquita's uncle who takes her by force from her home a "choza allá en medio del lago, en las islas flotantes" (Chávez 35) to the city of Puno, "esa tierra dura, seca, firme"(37) where he sells her to the household of *la señora grande* as a servant. As the uncle leads Merciquita to the unknown destination of *la señora grande*, her reaction is passive and resigned, marked only in the narrative by a contraction of her mouth and a stooping body. She is powerless to act or rebel. And even if she were to rebel, who would she count on; what would she do; where would she go? It is hard not to think of her as the child that has lost her paradise, her lake, her community, her freedom. It is hard not to think of her ancestors being pulled out of their homes to work in the mines of Potosi[3] where they would find their impending fate. As Merciquita's uncle finishes the business deal, he then acknowledges her presence and as a justification for his

betrayal tells her that from now on she will have food everyday. Then, he adds: "tienes que hacer caso a esa señora, ella va a ser buena contigo" (39). In this way, the uncle becomes an instrument of oppression.

Merciquita's displacement from her home to a community of *mistis* takes away her sense of security and belonging. Not only is she taken away from her mother, but uprooted out from her culture and Aymara[4] community. Merciquita enters another physical and cultural space, one of external and inner exile, where her identity is lost. The narrative structure undergirds this cultural destruction in the rendering of the story for it is not Merciquita or an omniscient narrator who tells the story, but Alejandra, the *misti*, who is a little girl when Merciquita arrives at the house of her grandfather. Now, as an old woman, Alejandra has returned to her family's home and is trying to recreate the events of her childhood in order to find an answer to the horrible events surrounding Merciquita's death. The reader's only view is Alejandra's recounting of a story in which a young indigenous girl is foreign, unknown, and for the young *misti*, mysterious. Even in this literary space, it is Alejandra, like the original Spanish priests and "learned men," that holds the power to tell us what Merciquita cannot utter or dare say.

Limited to one identity—that of servant, Merciquita becomes the Other, referred to by the elderly Alejandra as a funny "cholita que hablaba solo aimara" (41).[5] In slavery, unable to speak the language, Merciquita is completely powerless to negotiate the smallest of terms in the master household. The narrator's mother, "blanca, de piel casi transparente" (38) who wears gold earrings and a gold tooth sets the boundaries as soon as Merciquita becomes her possession. With a language that Merciquita doesn't understand and with threatening gestures, *la señora grande* sets the spatial rules of the house. Merciquita is not to enter certain rooms nor touch certain things. She gives her a corner of a room full of junk as her sleeping quarters and a corner of the dining room as the space that she will occupy while they eat, coming out only to feed the dogs. She too sets the linguistic sub-space as to how Merciquita is to address the children. Niño Fernando and Niña Alejandra become "ñiitoo" and "ñii-taa" (40) in Merciquita's attempt to imitate the Castilian Spanish pronunciation. Merciquita, with no means to resist, surrenders to the power of *la señora grande* by following her with her head down.

In what seems like a reminiscence to reconcile, Alejandra, the narrator, attributes thoughts and feelings to this unknown Other. In this way, we

have a glimpse into the *mistis* mind in all the turmoil of guilt, rationalization, and torment. The result for Merciquita, however, is complete loss. In this cultural translocation, Merciquita loses her voice, caught in a nightmarish world with no means of communication. Like the indigenous women today, without the means of language, entry into the public space is denied.

The story interestingly enough starts with Merciquita's death underlying the theme of the story and supporting Alejandra's subjective report of the events: "El torrente de sangre le está anegando la garganta, la boca, la nariz. Doblada sobre sí misma agita los pequeños brazos y alcanza a gritar ¡mamita!, antes que su cuerpo caiga sobre la mancha rojiza que la tierra seca empieza a succionar con avidez" (35). Chávez powerfully uses the image of the dry earth sucking greedily Merciquita's blood in the midst of the night in the *Altiplano*, the high Andean plateau, to remind us of the past, of the exploitation of indigenous people that continues to the present. In this foreign space, Merciquita is completely detached from her culture and from the power of language. All ties to the past are cut, and Merciquita succumbs to her oppressors in the only way she can—death.

As we move from rural to urban Peru, we see the relative boundaries as defined by McDowell contract and harden. As Merciquita is ripped from her cultural home and space, we see the results of the loss of cultural foundation in the story, "Los días y las horas." In this story by Pilar Dughi, the young woman, a post-exile, alienated mixture of antagonist and protagonist, is indeed at the end of her isolation—from all the connections of society and herself. She moves from La Merciquita's space of despair to the twilight space of anti-space. A space that she ironically sees as her first point of becoming.

In "Los días y las horas," the external space is a congested neighborhood in Lima—a tense and sweltering microcosm tightly held together by recalcitrant boundaries of power relations. If power relations construct the rules that defines boundaries, we see in the first paragraph of the story the young woman's perception on the "rules." The neighborhood is marked by "ese sol aplastante empecinado en agotar energías y exterminar buenos propósitos" (55). The neighborhood streets below the young woman's apartment is bursting with the heat of the summer sun, beating down to produce "el vaho sofocante de cebollas, orines, limones y basura de las carretillas de comida" (55).

We also see the mother and daughter running a small take-out food service for workers to pay the bills since the father/husband's departure

The home, a private space, is no longer the basic unit of reproduction or a separate space of solace. It is a business that displaces kinship relations and support, replacing it with its own hierarchical power structure of boss/mother—employee/daughter. New rules define the space for the young woman and her mother. The daughter experiences her situation as having but two choices—to remain as an employee of her mother or to return to the shop of the lascivious Don Julián. It is against this reality that the young woman rebels, crossing the line into the twilight space of terrorism that she identifies as her salvation.

It all begins for the daughter one day two years ago. That single, beginning moment when everything a person is and can be changes—forever. For the daughter, that moment comes after school when a "un muchacho pálido y esquivo" with a tone of voice "solemne y ceremonioso" (60) spoke to her. Dughi does not tell us what was said, but we do know that "si no hubiera sido por eso, nunca hubiera soñado más allá de la terca realidad que clausuraba sus puertas y aún seguiría en la bodega, extenuando años, acabando sus fantasías" (60). But through Dughi's clean, sparse narrative that alternates between the present time of interactions between mother and daughter and the daughter's memories of the dead soldier from the night before, we see a coterminous escalation of alienation and passivity in this private space. Responses to her mother's commands to clean or fix the food are limited to two-word replies or empty, automatic repeating of her mother's last words. Her mother does not react to these silences, but rather continues to issue orders to her "employee." She is now lost to this private space and separated from all the familial relationships that bind a person to home and community. Whatever is left for this young woman is found in the streets at night, and it is found with a gun in her hand.

Although she has moved into the public space which she ironically never calls "revolution," she does not seem to have moved at all except into what seems like a twilight space, in which time and communal relations do not exist. Dughi makes it immediately clear that while the young woman feels that she has found herself, she has merely substituted violence for resistance and aggression for self-determination. It is true that she sees no future for herself, but is that why she chooses terrorism over purposeful resistance? Dughi seems to suggest that her choice is one of individual egoism and the desire to feel powerful by privileging personal narcissism over real social change. Meaningful social change implies a

recognition of and identification with other oppressed people. Yet she herself, seems to view others as objects. Her judgment of the people in her neighborhood—those people in the same situation as hers—are viewed as "aquella masa de hombres y mujeres que marchan en una procesión sin rumbo fijo" (55). When she is fixing dinner for the workers she takes out a bag of rice. When she opens a small hole in the bag, she observes "miles de granitos golpean la superficie de la fuente confundiéndose unos con otros, como pequeños seres sin destino, pero cuya fuerza es tal, tan intensa y tan violenta, que a pesar de su diminuto volumen logran horadar la estrecha abertura de la bolsa de plástico ampliándola" (57). As she squeezes the rice, she becomes like the puppeteer almost god-like, manipulating and controlling the purity of the little beings. Her position, then, like the oppressor, is the one of ultimate power. The grains of rice like the people around her are nothing more than objects to be controlled by her hands.

And so she goes willingly into the twilight space of terrorism. She finds first of all a difference in the power relationships between men and women—one, she mistakenly feels is different from the devaluation of a patriarchal society. Thinking of the night before when she and Víctor had shot a soldier, she "agazapada junto a él, pero lejana y distante también "Porque estamos solos ahora" le había dicho él "porque tú harás lo tuyo y yo lo mío" y aquél fue el primero el único instante de su vida en que comprendió con horror que se estaba labrando un destino en el que nada ni nadie la acompañarían más" (57). Víctor does not give directives; he does not devalue her. But the narrative suggests that she is equally damned because in this lost space she is totally alone.

When a person becomes involved in a political collective action, the entry into this public space creates changes in identity, even if the political situation remains unchanged. In Dughi's twilight space of terrorism time stops for the young woman as she shoots the soldier "porque la vida ahora era así, sin tiempos largos ni cortos, sin plazos, y aquel hombre no lo sabía, o si lo supo fue demasiado tarde porque cayó tan rápido que no se dió cuenta que estaba muerto" (62). Dughi seems to suggest that the young woman, as all who enter the twilight space of terrorism, will fall to their real or social deaths without realizing it and can only be lost in this anti-space where only terrorism, isolation and timelessness exist.

In the story, "El Legado (Una historia de Huancayo)," we see a departure from the ill-fated revolution. In terms of space, Carmen Gorri

departs from our traditional ideas of physical space and recreates a more indigenous cosmology of ayn*i* ("I – Knee"), the traditional Inka belief of reciprocity.[6] In "Los días y las horas," the young woman has cut her ties with all members of her family and community, and we are left with the impending failure of her revolution. Gorriti, on the other hand, has her protagonist, Felícitas, lead a successful revolution, not with a gun in hand, but as a disembodied spirit after her death.

In the Andean way of thinking of a*yni*, the concepts of gendered geography would suffer the loss of gender and have to produce a new definition of geography. According to Catherine Allen, a*yni* or reciprocity "is like a pump at the heart of Andean life" (93). It is the "constant give-and-take of ayni and mink'a [that] maintains a flow of energy" (93). Life force and reciprocity, which becomes important to understand in Gorriti's story, can be transmitted between people and to and from all existing things (93). That life force or the transmission of it has nothing to do with gender; it is gender-neutral, leaving, if you will, the socio-geography of our earth existence.

In the beginning of "El Legado," Gorriti's protagonist, Felícitas, has a stroke and dies with her family around her. At this last moment of consciousness, she reviews episodes in her life in which one single emotion blocks her from the personal power of making choices: the fear that doen't allow her to tell her godmother that she wanted to study; the fear that doesn't allow her to tell Juan "no quiero que usted me toque así" (78); the fear that made her run away with Juan instead of telling others she was pregnant. Her last thoughts crystallized: "Pobre el que tiene miedo, pensó mientras se disolvía y ya no tenía más miedo de nada; mientras su pensamiento empezaba a vagar por el cuarto, tratando de posarse sobre algún cuerpo tibio que pudiera recibirlo" (78). As Felícitas' spirit floats in the room, it cannot penetrate Juan because "no tenía ninguna puerta abierta, sólo tenía una rabia inmensa que le sellaba las mandíbulas" (78). It fails to penetrate Justina, Felícitas' daughter, because she too is in a fury over her mother's hard, exhausting life. Felícitas' spirit also tries to enter Manuelito, her mentally retarded son, but without success because he is overcome with sorrow. Not able to "alight" on anyone in the room, Felícitas' spirit wanders the streets of the town.

It is interesting that the market area where Felícitas works and lives is a great deal like the young terrorist's neighborhood in "Los días y las horas." Although the urban complexities of Lima far surpass the small

markets in cities like Huancayo and Chilca, it is probably true that there is the same mixture of private and public space in the home as the family tries to make ends meet. Yet we see vast differences in the way both of these characters live and occupy that space. The title, "El Legado (Una historia de Huancayo)," suggests that the legacy Felícitas will leave is, in fact, the legacy that she has carried with her from the Pampas. The character, Felícitas, is more than a good woman; she is Pachamama, the Quechua Earth Mother. When news of her death filters through the community, everyone grieves for the woman who has been so kind to so many people. It is, in fact, these very people, the porters, food vendors, abused women, and alcoholics, or "pilgrims or *caminantes*" as Gorriti calls them that flock to Felícitas' wake in such numbers that the family has to bring benches from the church and rent another patio to seat all of them. On the third night of the wake, the mourners are gathered and so involved in talking about Felícitas, they do not hear the terrorist's bomb or the soldiers who run into the wake, placing the mourners under arrest. The soldiers proclaim that everyone in the room is a terrorist "Las cara embetunadas se confundían con la sombra, no se podía reconocer en ellos al hijo del vecino, al primo, al amigo que fue levado el mes pasado. Lentamente, se hizo el recuerdo colectivo de aquellos parientes del pueblo que fueron conducidos al cuartel para nunca más volver" (80).

It is at this moment that Felícitas' thoughts are able to enter Manuelito's mind. He grasps the hand of his sister who takes her father's hand. The action is repeated until all the mourners are holding hands and begin to chant, "El miedo se acabó, el miedo se acabó" (80). With only twenty soldiers and more than two hundred mourners, the commanding officer reevaluated the situation, deciding that this was a wake after all and that they were "ciudadanos que poseían derechos civiles" (81).

The decision of the commanding officer leaves much for speculation for what are two hundred people versus twenty soldiers armed with submachine guns. Clearly, the boundary of power does not prevent the breach by the soldiers, but it does control the outcome once they enter the private space. Was he too affected by the spirit of Felícitas? If the young terrorist in "Los días y las horas" would laugh at waiting for a spirit to ignite the revolution, she would have missed the point of a*yni*. Whether you view *ayni* as a cosmological expression or by taking a more sociological view, the idea of reciprocity creates its own kind of power that is exclusive of Western notions of political, economic, or judicial structures.

In the story, it seems to have produced a momentary balance between fear and strength—both for the mourners and the army officer. In this ability to balance power, it both admits and dismisses oppression.

Goritti seems to suggest that internalized oppression is, by far, more destructive to the lives of individuals. Clearly, Felícitas suffered the many roles and oppressions imposed on her as a woman. She had been a poor vegetable vendor in the market; she had paid the way for the family when Juan would not. She had suffered all the oppressions of being a woman in a male-oriented society. But she does not ponder on this in her last thoughts before death. These thoughts are devoted to those times in which she recognizes fear as a more powerful oppressor than an oppressive system. Perhaps, it is fair to say that fear is the embryo of violence, hate, and eventually, oppression. Felícitas realizes, most importantly, that fear is a sickness of the mind that does nothing but invite other sickness like hate, resentment, depression, or alienation. It either makes one a fearful oppressor or a fearful oppressed. In either case, there is no freedom of choice over nothingness.

One can live in a system of oppression, but the story seems to suggest that it is when a person internalizes the oppression that it is most damaging. *Ayni* or reciprocity provides an anecdote to the destructive powers of oppression by establishing sustainable relationships that create another space—tensile pockets of intersections between public and private spaces—in which as Goritti says, the circle of strength closes. When the mourners clasp hands, three different "spirits" enter the space: Felícitas' release of fear, the collective memory of relatives that never returned from imprisonment, and perhaps, the collective memory of all the indigenous like Merciquita who have died through the centuries. It is at this point that the dead and living connect in this private space and through this connection, there is a political transformation, a change in political consciousness. Contrary to the young terrorist in "Los días y las horas," Gorriti suggests that revolution requires support and change in the private space before it can be successful in bringing about change in the public space. Like a Ghandian philosophy, Felícitas reminds the reader that individual freedom and an evolving political consciousness must precede political action. And for women, the political action must take place in spaces that are blends of private and public space.

In choosing these stories, I wanted to look at the various paradigms of female resistance in the ordinary spaces of Peruvian life. "La Merciquita"

offers no space for resistance and serves as the beginning or reference point, if you will, for the historical struggle of all Peruvian women. In their stories, these writers suggest the ways to succeed and to fail in collective action by women, both indigenous and mestiza. It is clear that Dughi paints a dark picture of the future when the oppressed destroy balance and withdraw from the requirements of reciprocity. It is equally clear what happens when a cultural heritage is destroyed by colonialism and replaced with the nothingness of narcissism. If each story is a snapshot of the condition of women in Peru, it is the story, "El Legado" that suggests the most successful paradigm for resistance—an expansion of private space that includes the Andean traditions of communal self-help and self-sufficiency. Although the *ayllu*[7] is not needed to manage land in the city, the collective exists in a cultural heritage that provides a blending of space that works to equalize a balance of power.

NOTES

[1] The word, *misti*, has more than one meaning. In the Andean provinces of Peru, it refers to "el Señor" or "the one in charge, the boss." In *El Abanico y la Cigarrera: La primera generación de mujeres ilustradas en el Perú*, Francesca Denegri cites Henri Favre as the one who defined the term as the Andean white settlers that live closely to the indigenous people, sharing with them their language, traditions, and customs.

[2] Encomienda was a Colonial institution in the Americas that resulted from the King of Spain's granting of land and indigenous people to the Conquistadores. Indians had to work for landowners or paid a tribute to their owners, who, in turn, had to teach them the Christian religion.

[3] During the Colonial period, Potosi, now in Bolivia, was part of the Viceroyalty of Peru. It was famous for its silver and tin mines where thousands of Indians were forced to work. Thousands also died in the mines.

[4] Indigenous people from Bolivia and Peru that live in the area of Lake Titicaca.

[5] Cholo or cholita is a derogatory term applied to an indigenous person who has come to the city to live. In this passage, it refers "affectionately" to Merciquita.

[6] As a word in Quechua, *ayni* represents reciprocity or balance. The principle of *ayni* works on many levels. In everyday life, it underpins the system of communal labor and constitutes a model for proper behavior. Taken on an cosmological level, it constitutes the rules of exchange of energy, both between other people and with the environment. For more reading on *ayni*, review the works of Inge Bolin, Catherine Allen, and Frederique Apffel-Marglin. Joan Parisi Wilcox's *Keepers of the*

Ancient Knowledge does not represent a scholarly rendering of the subject matter, it does present a first-person account, buttressed by the involvement of anthropologist, Juan Nuñez Del Prado.

[7] An ayllu can refer to group of people, either through blood kinship or by ties to community or a place. While a nuclear family is the basic economic unit, it is not individually responsible for its economic well-being. Following the principles of reciprocity, land, resources, and skills are shared and exchanged to enable families to work together to achieve something greater than could be accomplished on an individual or familial level.

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