

**“LET’S PLAY INDOORS / OUTDOORS AND FIND WHO SHE IS”:
AN ECOCRITICAL APPROACH TO PHYLLIS BARBER’S
*RAW EDGES: A MEMOIR***

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Phyllis Barber was raised in a Mormon household but Barber gave up being an active member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, popularly known as the Mormon Church, for a long time, even though she still had a close need to feel in communion with God. In *Raw Edges*, her second autobiography, Barber chronicles the years after, before and during her first marriage, based upon the axis of a trip on bicycle across the United States. Barber’s rendition of the setting explores a set of connections that study how the place she dwells in influences her own concept of self. In this paper, I aim at analyzing how, in this autobiography, Barber tries to compose her identity from an ecocritical perspective, considering how nature and landscape operate as an important device to exercise that search.

Keywords: Mormon Literature, Western American Literature, Phyllis Barber, Identity, Ecocriticism, Mormonism, Autobiography

Phyllis Barber was raised in a Mormon household. Consequently, I dare state that she is a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, popularly known as the Mormon Church, though, in fact, Barber gave up being an active member a long time ago. In any case, she still had a close need to feel in communion with God and she has always been aware of her bond to the Church into which she was raised: “I consider myself well-introduced to faith, a child of the faith, a child of faith, a person who believes deeply in a God who wants us to share, a person who desires to brighten one spot in this earthly garden wherever that might be” (Barber 2004: 17).

Besides, Barber had to follow certain roles which Mormon orthodox culture advocated for women, such as those of being a mother and a caring wife. The conflicts arising from the promotion and consecration to these roles are a constant presence in her literature. Those aspects of her personal life have been developed or translated into Literature through a complex and visionary relationship with her environment and landscape, drawing powerful and significant metaphors which try to resolve certain questions persistently present in her works.

In her second autobiography, *Raw Edges: A Memoir*, those aspects that I have mentioned before (motherhood, gender issues or social and cultural entrapments) collapse and they seem to close certain circles to launch an overall analysis of Barber’s production. Specifically, *Raw Edges* chronicles the years after, before and during Barber’s first marriage, based upon the telling of a trip on bicycle across the United States. In this paper, I aim at analyzing how Barber tries to compose her identity in this autobiography but from an ecocritical perspective. I will consider how nature and landscape operate as an important device to exercise that search, since her rendition of the setting explores a set of

connections that study the tension between identity and place, how the place she dwells in influences her own concept of self.

The sense of place in Barber is not only located in a specific land. In her literature, place is also approached as a matter of movement, in a fluid sense. Barber pulses the tension between moving and remaining, between migration and belonging, between a secure household and an uncertain adventure. Holly Youngbear-Tibbetts states that mobility can enable relatedness, an important feeling for the performance of an identity which is seen as a flux of relational and global connections (2007: 157). Belonging to a place requires certain share of responsibility that allows the affirmation of our subjectivity in relation to the space. Barber, in her fiction, shows how her characters long for being in communion to the landscape but she also shows how they feel a call to move, to detach from that need to belong.

Specifically in *Raw Edges* that stress on movement magnifies because traveling plays a basic role, both for the plot and for the ideological or moral positioning of the story. Her inner traveling backwards into the memory of her life (which could be addressed as the core of any autobiographical attempt) is articulated through a metaphorical recollection of a biking trip across the country in which Barber shows how that redefinition or search for self is a complex process encompassing a variety of emotions. Her search is performed as a process, as movement placed over ground. In fact, Barber’s two autobiographies become an exercise on redefinition, a sincere and brave search for identity, but with a stress in moving away, back and forth, that communicates complex meanings.

That trip is thus a key element in the book, both from a technical point of view and as a source of meaning. Traveling has been, especially in literature, related to adventure, redemption or reconstruction. Scott Slovic conceives traveling as a source of meaning. He considers the constituency of its paradigm giving that “travel itself is a way not only to gain new adventures and collect experiences but to ritualize loss and disorientation, to force one’s mind to create new maps of meaning. The mind thus destabilized and invigorates, tends to see through established structures and patterns, even upon returning home” (2003: 261). Barber’s bike trip in *Raw Edges* resembles these ideas. She herself clearly signifies that she is re-wandering through the trail of the Mormon pioneers, but in the opposite direction, which is, *per se*, a metaphoric revision of the “established structures and patterns” shaping her.

That trip illustrates the tension between dwelling and traveling, between centrifugal and centripetal forces. Susan Stanford Friedman calls this tension paradox and states that land is not only something static, centered, positioned, but also moving, shifting and dynamic (2001:15). What Friedman calls “the paradox of location” (15) parallels what I call here tension. Whether it is labeled as tension or paradox, the truth is that, in this autobiography, those impulses clash with Barber’s “established structures and patterns” in a pregnant way. Those patterns are a given from her cultural education within the Mormon Church. In the book, she shows how those patterns delineate much of her definition of self, that definition that she is now trying to redefine. Mormonism (or faith, religion) is attached or related to something static, a place. Religion echoes meanings of belonging and community and stability and shelter; whereas experience, in Barber, is linked to movement, adventure, learning and risk. Again, the metaphoric instrumentation of that trip gets its value within this set of ideas.

When, in *Raw Edges*, Barber tries to approach (and at the same time reject) the possibilities of meeting Jerry García in San Francisco’s 1960s or when she has her first experience with adultery, the reader feels that those patterns are at work. In any case, the opposite feeling, the absence of walls, of a frame, the open landscape, is also a source of

pain: “I was still caught in the world without walls. I was used to boundaries” (Barber 2009: 179). This is the tension, the nucleus of her need for redefinition. When Neil Campbell says that “as in a complex transfusion, any closed system needs ‘new blood’, any rooted space needs rerouting and opening up, any house must be unhoused” (2008: 13), what he fails to measure is the emotional prize that one has to pay to get to that point. Barber does measure it: the constant tension between being and going is reported through a symbolic game that she articulates by imposing and contrasting indoors and outdoors within her narrative.

In an autobiography in which Barber recalls her failed marriage and the years in which she struggled to reinvent herself, Barber starts the story in an attic to extend it through a journey on bicycle across the United States that comes to an end without a perceptible closure. The development of the interplay between indoors and outdoors, interior and exterior spaces plays an important and illustrative example.

The story begins in that attic in Denver where Barber is still fighting with her personal ghosts. “Blues in the Attic” is the title of the first chapter and it is dated in 2002. A sentence resonates all throughout the chapter: “In the middle of that fire, I was no philosopher” (Barber 2009: 5). After a second divorce, Barber is going through a period of crisis. Her first husband invites her to celebrate Memorial Day but he had invited his girlfriend and her family as well. Sadness takes grip of her again. The blues gets played again. The space is framed and “the walls too close. The room too stuffy. There was no one’s cold or ear infection to worry about. No unruly sons to bust for breaking curfew, so why couldn’t I go back to sleep?” (15) Her closeted life acts as synonym to a claustrophobic room in which social space is categorized by culture and education. Her previous life was governed by boundaries, rules, duties, roles and beliefs and she was drawn into an open space where she felt the lack of those boundaries which define and concretize. The walls of the room symbolically stand for the boundaries which become barriers, the same “barriers I’d always erected around myself that kept me protected and safe, the way I did when I took banjo lessons from Jerry Garcia” (Barber 2009: 194).

Still married, Barber moves to San Francisco in the 1960s. There, she meets Jerry García, who, in years to come, was to become the leader of the psychedelic band The Grateful Dead. In that experience, the definition of interior and exterior locations plays its role. The circumstances of those years and that place are described as a context, a background, scenery being watched from a certain distance. She was in a “sea shell” (39) and she was moving to a Bay where “something tidal happening outside my safe shell” (40). Menlo Park seems to be evoked as a composition of facts, pictures, details. The real place is a small room in which she is taking banjo classes from Jerry García. Her inability to communicate with García resembles how she is unable to interact with the political, ideological and cultural context of San Francisco in the 1960s, mainly because of her upbringing and culture. Personal or cultural boundaries apparently take the shape of walls.

This situation changes at the same time that her marriage fails. Then, she is brought into an exterior world which is related to darkness and loss, but it is also the location of a natural space, open space, which will be first a new shelter for her anger and deception.

Progressively that source for calming her anger and despair will become a place to feel relieved and envision possibilities. Little by little, she establishes a pattern of inner movement towards landscape. The equilibrium of forces is leant towards the intensity of a positive engagement with nature: “A week later while Chris and Jeremy were off at school, I strapped Brad into his blue vinyl car seat that hung over the back of the passenger seat and drove south on the winding road at the base of Mount Olympus, the most imposing mountain rising out of the Salt Lake Valley. I felt surrounded by its divine majesty. This was Mount Olympus, home to the gods” (118-119).

I observe this same progress in her bike trip. The trip starts with expectation: “we were ready to burn up the long, straight, two-lane road into the farmlands of eastern Colorado, those acres and acres of newly planted crops barely showing tips of green, and acres and acres barely seeded in this late spring” (30). Here, nature plays the role of an idealistic sense of redemption: “lucky us on the open road in great outdoors” (31). This expectation is always blended with a latent echo of failure: “but they were all fenced off, once fence like the next one” (31). Nevertheless, Barber is successful in taming her own relationship to exterior space. She succeeds in carving a niche for her, a symbolic place between walls and horizons, barriers and boundaries.

It is not by coincidence that water is the substance in which this process finally takes place. After having her last sentimental failure and feeling a great sense of loss, Barber starts her last journey, a sudden, circular, shorter, disoriented trip in which she bikes far but with no direction:

I found a solitary place off the highway to lean my bicycle against a tree, a grass-bent path to follow, and a railroad track to walk along. It paralleled the river. The water, except for occasional sections of marsh, last year’s split cattails, and bare-branched trees where eagles had already nested for the season, was most always in sight. When I couldn’t see it, I could feel it. The river. The water. (245)

In this short but significant travel, the exterior space preserves some sort of physical aggressiveness. Landscape does not welcome her. Instead, it rises a challenge. Barber is the one searching some sort of connection that may prove revealing, but landscape follows its own rhythm, foreign to any necessity that she happens to show. Commitment and determination appear to be mandatory attributes that she needs to exercise in order to get that connection. In this context, water performs a symbolic role; it symbolizes the fluidness evoking at once her pains and the energy she is trying to gather: “water, ocean, of how waves pulled away from the shore, then rushed toward it and curled and rolled and crashed and then pulled together again. Endless motion. Endless breaking. Endless knitting back together. Nothing but motion. It was always moving. Never static. Never definable” (124-125).

When returning from that short journey, the complexity of the tension between interior – exterior location aggrandizes its significance. In both she finds repair and hurt, in both she places the ingredients to form her identity. While she is finding understanding in her outdoor experience, she is still longing for a sense of place. Belonging and boundaries (walls) are still envisioned as a source for definition. When she is biking back home, even if “no one waited there” (246), she still longs for the certainties she has missed: “I wished I was inside that world of porch lights and houses rather than a traveler in the night, rolling along the highways, thinking she should arrive somewhere welcoming” (247). She belonged inside (meaning both losing her family as if losing a certainty provided by the definitions in which she always believed, and a religion which provided those definitions and now is asking for a personal redefinition) and she is still aware of the warm and comfortable security that this certainty offered to her. She has experienced pain in and out of a place that starts to be mental rather than physical. Thus, she tries to incorporate the meaning that her journey from the lost sense of home to the feeling of exterior as a redeeming possibility is offering to her: “everything seems so right when you’re out of doors under the sky” (239). That movement, that progress, that bike trip, her whole autobiography seem to offer an illustration of a painful process through which the opposition of interior and exterior spaces portrays her own swaying between extremes.

In conclusion, Barber expresses her tensions and conflicts through a physical game that utilizes space as a literary device. The polarity effected by the reaction that she poses

before different landscapes articulates a description of identity which finds its roots in different levels of belonging and departing. In Barber’s memoirs, the confrontation between exterior and interior spaces helps to understand her sense of identity as an intricate (almost impossible) balance between the need to belong as a source of substance and the desire for adventure as a source of experience. In any case, Barber rejects extremes. She rejects to choice between one side or the other, even if choosing sticks out as a probable solution to her affliction. Her trying to capture the human tendency towards paradox, turns her autobiography into a literary research on how to break dichotomies and extremes but without forgetting the grief of such an unrewarding search. Barber’s autobiographical effort condenses a representation of identity that relies on these complexities, in a self which is entangled by different representations and performances in progress, under construction by stories which relied on landscape as a source for a redefinition which speaks of hope the same that it speaks of despair.

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THIS TEXT IS PART OF THE VOLUME:

Martín Alegre, Sara (coord. and ed.), Melissa Moyer (ed.), Elisabet Pladevall (ed.) & Susagna Tubau (ed.). *At a Time of Crisis: English and American Studies in Spain*. Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona/AEDEAN, 2012. ISBN-10: 84-695-4273-7, ISBN-13: 978-84-695-4273-6. Available from www.aedean.org