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"*THE CANOPY IS HER HOME*" GENDERED SPACE IN AMERICAN INDIAN INTERTRIBAL GATHERINGS

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Abstract:
This ethnographic report of American Indian dance events, called powwows, focuses on the process of gender difference inscribing spatial difference. Among the participants and attendees, middle-aged native women, implicitly charged with the transmission of values and ideologies, wield the power to control the process of cultural production and the generation of signs and symbols, which find expression through the management of the spectator space under a canopy.

Keywords: ethnography of space, temporary social stratification, American Indian women

1. Introduction

American Indians who are drawn for economic reasons from rural reservations to metropolitan areas such as Southern California continue to maintain, if possible, a reliance on clan and tribal reciprocity not only as a network for employment opportunities but also for psychological support to moderate the potential alienation inherent in urban isolation. Nevertheless, much of the social cohesion provided by the tribe in the homeland is lost in relocation to the city; as a result, urban Indians, especially those from smaller communities, find themselves compelled to widen their social networks beyond their kindred by redefining their identity along broader and more inclusive ethnic parameters. One of the ways some seek to reaffirm their ethnic identity is through regrouping processes with members of other bands and tribes from virtually all parts of North America in pan-Indian organizations in which ancestral origins are deemphasized. Among them are service organizations commonly referred to as Indian centers, Christian churches with native congregations, and, most conspicuously, intertribal dance celebrations called powwows, many of which are sponsored yearly by municipalities throughout Los Angeles and Orange counties (Cowger 2019).

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2. The Ethnographic Setting

Powwows are one or two-day events which provide the predominant frame for the (re)-construction of ever-evolving identity schemata of indigeneity. In far-reaching implications, the powwow has become a meaningful expression of a pan-Indian ethnicity in a cosmopolitan setting where maintaining a separate tribal identity is particularly challenging. Thus, rather than just a mere dance performance for entertainment, the urban powwow contains a subtext which is dedicated to the emblematic resolution of the enormous psychological predicament of coming to terms with what Bourdieu has characterized as the symbolic violence perpetrated by the hegemony.

Held in a public park, a school gymnasium, or an athletic field, these gatherings are defined by the iconic traditions of the Great Plains, even though many participants do not hail from that cultural province. Choruses of five to ten men huddled around large rawhide base drums strike a steady beat and chant in piercing falsetto while dancers in spectacular regalia of fringed buckskin, bright cloth, and feathers delight the spectator with a feast of rhythmic colors. Often referred to as war dances, ethnologists and ethnomusicologists have traced them to the Grass, Scalp, Calumet, and Stomp dances of the Great Plains and the Great Lakes (Howard 1955, 16; Young 1981, 103; Browner 2000). A contemporary distinction between Northern and Southern Plains traditions regarding songs, regalia and dance styles still mirrors that diversity of provenance.

Ostensibly, the ritual and social processes of the powwow are dominated by men, particularly by those who can trace their lineage to one of the reservations located in the Great Plains. Their tribal background privileges them with an acknowledged ritual expertise and axiomatically imbues their discourses with an agency of power and influence. Furthermore, just as warriors in traditional times, contemporary veterans of the armed services, especially those with combat experience from such conflicts as the Vietnam and Gulf wars, continue to hold a special place of honor. Also, as a rule, only men are permitted to sit at a drum to perform the cantata of the prairies, whose melodies, vocables, and lyrics propitiate the spirits for good fortune at home and success in battle abroad. Since singing and dancing have traditionally been considered a form of praying, the modern powwow embraces a syncretic religiosity as well as echoes of animistic ritual that has always been in the realm of male authority. Moreover, just as in traditional times, the powwow as a social space reinforces a culture of oratory that endorses men with charisma and presence.

Yet, participation extends beyond the orbit of male paramountcy to feminine forms of social action and cultural production, revealing differential access to power and authority in this temporary and mobile community. Though women are encouraged to participate in full regalia, they do so in their own dance-style categories. A few may even stand next to the drum groups, providing additional harmony by singing an octave higher than the men and trailing behind them after each chorus. Women who enter the dance arena in street clothes must at least be robed in a dance shawl, especially if they wish to join the long queue behind a relative or friend who is being honored. At the edge of the arena, without actually entering it, a few women can always be seen dance-

stepping in place to the beat of the drum to inspire kinsmen during competitive performances, often involving prize money.

3. The Canopy as a Gendered Space

In stark contrast to the male-dominated activities of the dance arena, the versicolored rows of canopies which surround it and under which the families of the singers and dancers sit belong to the realm of middle-aged women. Harkening back to the nomadic hunter-gatherer division of labor of the pre-reservation era, when the mobile tipis and their contents were the sole property of women, the modern powwow canopy seems to persevere as a relic of that former cultural practice. Though in aboriginal times the tipis were assembled and dismantled only by women, nowadays the setting up and taking down of canopies is executed primarily by the men of the family. In fact, they seem to be ready at a moment's notice to assist other families with that task as well.

Unlike the tipi, the canopy space is obviously square; however, it forms part of the greater dance arena, which is always a large circle, symbolic of the cosmos. In the east, the cardinal direction signifying the beginning of the life cycle, an opening for the entrance of the dancers is made available. In the west, the cardinal direction associated with the decline of life, a table with a public address system is set up for the master of ceremonies. The canopies erected nearer the emcee area correspond to the families of the functionaries of the event, such as the host drum group and the head man and woman dancers, who are designated individuals charged with starting the general dance episodes called "intertribals." The dance circle is typically outlined with chalk or washable paint, and the spaces next to the markings are taken up by families with their canopies on a first-come-first-served basis. Latecomers place themselves behind the earlier arrivals, and large gatherings can result in three to four rows of canopies packed tightly behind the dance arena. Shortly before the powwow begins, a respected male elder, referred to as the spiritual advisor, blesses the arena and, by implication, its surrounding canopy space with burning sage. Those who wish to be individually smudged step forward to the markings of the circle, where the spiritual advisor is spreading purifying sage smoke with a fan made of eagle feathers, as he moves slowly in a sunwise direction around the entire ring.

Constructed of a collapsible aluminum frame with a polyester tent top, the typical canopy provides an area of about three by three meters. Large families bring two or three of these pop-up sunshades, which they connect with long bungee cords that may also be used to cordon off the entire unit from neighboring ones. In addition to a kaleidoscopic assortment of camping chairs and folding tables, huge ice chests which must be wheeled in on carts come filled to the brim with cold drinks and snacks, providing some of the creature comforts for viewing the celebration. On the folding tables invariably rest large cedar boxes, in which dance regalia items have been transported. Of ritual significance, such cases made of fragrant cedar wood, usually carpentered avocationally, imply the ownership of eagle feathers, the most prized possession. Of practical import, cedar wood protects such treasures from infestation with moths or mites. Yet, regalia items that are

not immediately being used are not returned to those containers but are hung conspicuously from the aluminum frame of the canopy, clearly marking the space as occupied by a family of dancers. Suspended from plastic hangers and flapping saliently in the breeze are the flashy women's dance shawls with long fringes. Other regalia items dangling from the canopy rafters might include porcupine roaches donned as headgear as well as enormous bustles constructed as circles of unusually large hawk or eagle feathers, which are tied with a belt to the lower back of a male dancer. Any regalia piece to which eagle feathers are attached, even smaller ones such as fans, dance sticks, and hair ties, is closely monitored lest it should fall to the ground and require a special blessing from the spiritual advisor to restore its power. Ironically enough, even though women preside over the vigilance of the canopy domain, they are expected to refrain from touching men's regalia. Especially menstruating females should distance themselves not only from regalia but also from the entire dance arena.

Ahead of the main event, women are busy helping their daughters, nieces, and younger sisters change into their regalia and braid their hair. After assisting younger sons, nephews and brothers with their regalia, men dress themselves and apply their own face paint. Yet, their hair, if long enough, is always braided by a female relative. Since braided hair is the appropriate way to enter the arena as a dancer, even the act of braiding in and of itself is highly symbolic.

With the dance preparations completed, women turn to socializing with friends and relatives within the sphere of the canopies. Men, on the other hand, are more likely to interact with their acquaintances in the ambiguous space of the wide circular thoroughfare that separates the canopies from the vendors offering food and native crafts. Middle-aged women may advise their teenaged daughters and nieces to avoid that no-man's-land and instead stay as much as possible in the family's canopy. Though the interactional patterns are fluid, the canopy is understood by powwow participants as a private space which must be respected as much as a campsite in a national park. Thus, the entire powwow space, composed of the dance arena, the ring of canopies, and the circular thoroughfare with the vendor stalls, accommodates a series of concentric circles from the sacred center to the profane periphery.

4. The Canopy as Contested Space

One or two-day events such as powwows take place in spaces that are always in the flow of becoming, with no point of stasis, as people are in constant motion. While the meanings of the canopy space appear to be firmly positioned in powwow culture, the temporariness of the gathering prevents its praxis from being completely static, and its dominion is therefore subject to be contested by divergent intercultural communicative processes (Raffles 2002, 185).

Though relying on English as the lingua franca, the emcee addresses his multi-ethnic audience with kinship terminology that takes on native connotations. Thus, the terms brother, sister and cousin are broadened to include all native persons of the same generation regardless of tribal affiliation, while their children are referred to as nephews

and nieces. On the other hand, the term friend marks an ethnic boundary since it is frequently employed for non-Indian persons, mostly Anglo-Americans, Hispanics, and at times a noticeable number of tourists from the Far East. This non-native aggregate of visitors, which almost always comprises the majority in sheer numbers, is acknowledged, welcomed, and encouraged to patronize the numerous vendors hawking native crafts, whose station fees help finance the event. But otherwise, this ever-present larger segment of actors is rarely addressed and is thus suppressed to the interactional margin.

Yet, these non-native guests, many of whom have never seen Indian dances, are naturally drawn to the arena to get a better look, without realizing, of course, that the event is not merely a show but a quasi-religious ritual with specific protocols for the demonstration of dignity and respect. The most egregious breeches of etiquette occur when non-native sightseers enter the dance arena to photograph a participant with a particularly dazzling outfit, only to be escorted away by the arena director. Unbeknownst to the innocent offender, the arena, after having been blessed by the spiritual advisor, should not be crossed but approached only in a sunwise circular direction around the margins of the marked circle. In addition, many dancers do not wish to have their picture taken without having been asked for permission, since they resent the commercial exploitation of their images without reaping a share of the profits. However, a more common faux pas ensues as emboldened tourists attempt to penetrate the dense ring of canopies, which interferes acutely with their desire to maneuver closer to the stunning prismatic and pulsating free-style pantomimes. The intrusions range from a tactful apologist with cellphone or camera in hand jumping quickly over children and objects to an oblivious shutterbug with professional-looking equipment taking his time in setting up a tripod with a high-definition camcorder in front of a seated native family in their canopy. The method of ejection can be quite direct, as in simply being told, "you can't be here." On the other hand, since Indian people value indirectness, a woman from one of the neighboring canopies may shout at the intruder, "the canopy is her home." When encroachment becomes so frequent as to be irritatingly imposing, bungee ropes, or even yellow caution-tape used by police departments for crime scenes, are tied around the canopy, rendering it essentially a forbidden space.

5. The Canopy as a Social Map

Thus, the canopy space is a restricted area that has a set of rules which determines who is allowed to occupy it and how its boundary will be crossed. The perceptions that arise from the existence of these perimeters create a definitive social map designed to confront potential hostility and symbolic violence emanating from the world beyond the sacred circle (Bourdieu 1977). At least for the duration of the powwow, the ground is divided into culturally determined social spheres with invisible walls, and, if necessary, even with visible bungee-cord fences, which defy any attempt to scale them. The powwow participants' discernment of the canopy beholds a clear space of social organization defined by the presence of women. Its association with a female identity renders the space particularly private, whose sphere is therefore eminently violated when non-native

trespassers enter it and thereby threaten to turn it into a public domain exposed to the dangers, real or imagined, of alien forces. Even though the powwow is situated in a public realm such as a park or a school's athletic field, the canopy as a private as opposed to a public sphere is contemplated as a criterion for mapping an inner as opposed to an outer metaphysical zone, regardless of the possibility of being walked into by uninformed actors of other ethnicities (Ardner 2020).

The deference to women's control of the physical as well as social domains of the canopy empowers them as the determinants as well as mediators of the allocation of not only the space itself but also of the objects situated within it. Along these lines, Goffman has argued that social structure is imagined micro-ecologically through spatial metaphors.

> *"Objects are thought to structure the environment immediately around themselves, they cast a shadow, heat up the surround, strew indications, leave an imprint, they impress a part of themselves, a portrait that is unintended and not dependent on being attended, yet, of course, informing nonetheless to whomsoever is properly placed, trained and inclined."* (Goffman 1979, 1)

Indubitably, the glamorous masculine regalia accoutrements swinging from the aluminum rafters imbue the canopy space with an air of prestige; however, it is the feminine dance shawls which by their sheer size and polychromatic radiance invite one's gaze and identify the social rank of occupants as much as any fancy name plate on a massive door. Some of the shawls are family heirlooms, especially if their lettering and insignias imply membership in an esteemed organization such the Veterans of Foreign Wars or the Gourd Dance Society, whose blue-and-red color scheme and peyote bird (anhinga) iconicity mark the occupants of the canopy with distinction in the greater powwow community. Additionally, ubiquitous spray bottles filled with water, employed as an aid for braiding hair, convey in no uncertain terms a family's strict adherence to dance protocols, details of which, such as the expectation of braided hair for dancers, are either shrugged off by less serious participants or unintentionally omitted by less knowledgeable ones. And since the braiding of hair is the sole province of women, the evidence of spray bottles strewn about the ground points to experienced and well-informed mothers, aunts, daughters, and nieces. In fact, most of the objects, including the multicolored folding chairs, the cedar boxes resting on picnic tables, and even the oversized ice chests, communicate a passionate commitment to what is often called the "Red Road," a dedication to sobriety and the preservation of traditional values through participation in the ever-busy powwow circuit of Southern California, where such events take place almost every other weekend. Moreover, these trappings perform an unconscious reinforcement of the status quo that is aspired to by those who have chosen to place themselves within that particular social stratification.

Hence, the canopy and its contents constitute what Bourdieu has termed cultural capital, which in this case not only reinforces female agency but also perpetuates the inequalities of social stratification within the temporary but recurrent powwow

community. The decisions, conscious or not, by the women of the canopies regarding the display of symbolic effects are demonstrative of social position, or more pertinently, are in and of themselves acts of social positioning. Therefore, women with a high volume of cultural capital have the power to arbitrate which objects constitute the appropriate symbols for the powwow's bon ton (Bourdieu 1987). By inadvertently imposing categories of thought and perception upon novices or less prominent participants, who linger at the social margins of the gathering, the women of the canopies facilitate the incorporation of unconscious scripts that tend to perpetuate their semiotic preferences. Those who wish to integrate themselves in the powwow culture take their cues from women whose modes of action are embedded in the cognitive structures that transmit the specter of legitimacy of that particular social order.

6. Conclusion

This ethnographic report of powwow events in urban Southern California has focused on the process of gender difference inscribing spatial difference. Among the female half of the participants and attendees, a significant portion belongs to that ruling class of individuals in the after-forty age group who as heads of households are particularly entrusted with the transmission of cultural values and ideologies. As such, they wield the power to control the process of cultural production and the generation of signs and symbols which find expression not only in comportment and self-presentation but also in the appropriation and management of space. This process of symbolic encoding produces a series of homologies between the spatial, symbolic, and social orders. For middle-aged native women of the powwow community, the canopy space constitutes a culturally sanctioned site of authoritative discourse whose elevated social status requires, nevertheless, justification and belief. The saliency of symbolically imbued possessions strategically placed within fields of vision confirms that conviction. Supervised by mature females belonging to a culture that values above all teaching by example, the canopy space is an effective way to communicate behavioral preferences and ideals from one generation to the next.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The author declares no conflicts of interests.

About the Author
Guillermo Bartelt is a sociolinguist who has focused his ethnographic and linguistic research on American Indian communities.

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