A Posture of Removal: Mary Rowlandson’s Location, Position, and Displacement

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In 1682, Mary Rowlandson published what would become known as the first “Indian captivity narrative.” Her work, entitled *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God*, tells of her capture by Wampanoag Indians in 1676, the eighty-two days of her captivity, and her eventual release. The published account of these events is valued not only as the initial expression of what would later develop into the genre of captivity narratives, but also as the first North American publication of its type by a woman, which created potential barriers to publication. As Deborah Madsen explains, in Rowlandson’s Puritan culture, women were “members of a powerless class.”

Perhaps as a way to grant authority to Rowlandson’s narrative or as a way to secure a reading audience for her work, the publisher printed Rowlandson’s captivity piece as part of a larger document, which included a preface by the leading Puritan minister, Increase Mather, and a concluding sermon written by Rowlandson’s husband, Joseph Rowlandson. Situated between these documents, men, and voices, Rowlandson’s narrative has thereby remained a significant context wherein literary critics ask questions of textual originality and editorial influence and tease out the complex relation between self and other.

While questions of original voice and textual mediation remain significant, I enter this conversation of Mary Rowlandson and of self and other through ideas of place. Throughout her narrative, Mary Rowlandson moves across and within multiple geographies. Initially situated in Lancaster, in the center region of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, her capture takes her west toward the Connecticut River, north to cross the Baquag River and beyond the Massachusetts Bay Colony territory, and then south again across the Baquag towards Lancaster. Rowlandson experiences forests, swamps, steep hills, and flat country. She dwells in wigwams, garrisons, houses, and in the open land.

More than a record of her travels in a given landscape, Rowlandson’s situatedness within place provides one basis whereby to explore the outlines of her self. Said differently, identity and the various expressions of it rely on relations to place. By place, I follow the lead of geographers such as Doreen Massey and John Agnew who define place as a scaled and multi-layered construct, and I draw on work from autobiographical studies that distinguish between but also correlate position and location to argue that Rowlandson is a figure of removal and displacement from multiple expressions of place. This reading of Rowlandson responds to and counters a propensity in critical work on
Rowlandson that does not fully account for both her position and location and thereby portrays her as a firmly emplaced figure. Although Rowlandson seeks to position herself through voice, actions, and text, such movements of agency occur *in conjunction with* the locating structures of culture, expectation, and memory. The resultant tension between self-positioning and other-locating leaves Rowlandson perpetually removed as she is unable to fully reposition herself within any significant site.

This understanding of self and identity by way of surrounding spatial contexts echoes Gaston Bachelard’s idea of “topoanalysis,” which he defines as a “systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives.” While I do not directly attend to the psychoanalytical component of Bachelard’s concept, I retain his argument that self is understood in a relation to place, and I propose that individuals are defined by place in at least two significant ways. First, places act as what Eudora Welty calls “gathering spots” for feelings. Similarly, Edward Casey argues that “places . . . gather experiences and histories, even languages and thoughts. . . . Places also keep such unbodylike entities as . . . memories.” Places are therefore sites of assembled meaning, and more than inert containers, places actively reinscribe their contents on those associated with them. As Rowlandson enters the wilderness, for example, she does not simply become surrounded by trees and hills; she is also defined by the previous experiences, remembrances, and emotions of this landscape.

Secondly, place defines individuals by a reciprocal action of imaging, or as Lawrence Buell has it, “How we image a thing, true or false, affects our conduct toward it, the conduct of nations as well as persons.” In comparable language, Lynda Sexson contends that “imagination forms reality. . . . The images we create in turn create us. The ways that we image the world (out of our imaginations) in turn give us the perspectives (images) we have on ourselves (the imaginal).” The places with which Rowlandson interacts are thereby not purely objective and static, but shift in definition according to perception and interpretation. Whether she is in Lancaster or in the wilderness, Rowlandson interacts with and is informed by more than the physical properties of these places but also experiences these sites as they are conceived, as ideas. This action of imaging not only directs Rowlandson’s response to place but in turn contributes to a shaping of her self.

The recognition of topographical markers throughout Rowlandson’s narrative is somewhat apparent, as are the images, experiences, and emotions that define those places and the individuals involved in them. However, who constructs and attributes those definitions and the resulting situation of Rowlandson is not always clear. At times she enfolds herself or is thrust into her current setting; at other moments, she distances herself or is propelled toward removal. Placement within a setting is elected as a nexus for self-definition as
well as arrangement outside of and away from specific locales. Implied here is the slippery nature of Rowlandson’s situatedness, a juncture constructed by her individual agency and by broader desires and needs of other people and structures. To attend to these nuanced complexities of Rowlandson’s platial relations, tracing the lines of distinction and correlation between location and position becomes beneficial.

Writing about self and place, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson distinguish location from position by defining location as those “coordinates in which narrators are embedded by virtue of their experiential histories” and by presenting position as that which “implies the ideological stances . . . adopted by a narrator toward self and others.” In my work with Rowlandson, I thereby take location to represent those aspects that are given or conferred while position indicates a tailored response or embraced posture. Both concepts, as Smith and Watson imply, are thereby related to and associated with geographical space, but both also speak of more than physical environments, for they also indicate cultural, political, and psychological aspects inherently represented in geographical places. For Rowlandson, location might be represented by Lancaster and the dietary restrictions as set out by her Puritan religion while her position is realized in her acceptance and eating of horse hooves while in captivity, an action otherwise shunned by her religious and cultural associations. While location and position represent subtle degrees of variance, therefore, they inherently coexist. I see this intertwining as similar to a gyroscope. The spinning inside wheel, representative of location, remains constant while the outside frames of the structure, similar to position, become oriented in multiple fashions. Thus, like the gyroscope’s distinct parts that function within a configuration of interdependence, location and position are best understood as distinct but interlocking counterparts.

Hence, attending to Rowlandson’s situatedness by way of her location and position supports access to the complexities of her emplacement, but one cannot be separated from the other. Although there are instances of self-positioning through expressions such as refusal, requests, and memory, Rowlandson is also located by the actions of others, her own narrative, and various obligations. In short, Rowlandson is best understood as a subject seeking her own positioning in conjunction with a set structure of locating impulses.

This approach and conclusion runs counter to a current impetus in Rowlandson scholarship that relies on firmly distinguishing between location and position. Preferring to highlight position, many critics seek to establish sites from which Rowlandson authentically speaks for herself, acts of her own accord, and clearly circumscribes her sense of self in opposition to a determinative backdrop. Denise Mary MacNeil, for example, interprets Rowlandson as a feminine precursor of the American frontier hero who acts independently of her surrounding culture and its expectations. Rowlandson’s actions are interpreted
as an expression of her own agency as she “[engages] with the American wilderness and the native peoples . . . in isolation from European American culture,” “[integrates] aspects of Native American culture” with her own culture despite existing prohibitions, and “[asserts] . . . the ‘I’ as an authority in the face of social/ cultural authority.” Read within this paradigm, Rowlandson is seen as responsible for “conquering and domesticating” the wilderness, negotiating her own release from captivity, and turning the wilderness into her home.

For MacNeil, Rowlandson’s position counters and restrains the locating apparatus of cultural expectations by her ability to work against the larger coordinates in which she is enmeshed. In a similar approach, Annette Kolodny views Rowlandson positioning herself domestically and fiscally when she “manages to carve out an economic niche for herself with her knitting skills” and when she uses the food and Bible she receives to “negotiate the often treacherous political terrain” and “spiritual desolation” of her captivity.

While MacNeil and Kolodny detect movements of autonomy within Rowlandson’s experiences, scholars such as Lisa Logan focus more on the positioning work of the text itself. Rowlandson’s narrative, argues Logan, is “about finding a place from which to speak, claiming a position of authority from which to represent self and experience”; the text works to “reestablish a social, ideological, and discursive ‘home’ for her.” According to Logan, Rowlandson succeeds in these goals, at least partially, as her text resists the “social, discursive, and political structures which define and confine women.” For Logan, Rowlandson is able to position her self by the fact that she “consistently resists interpretations of her experience that tie the meaning of her captivity to socially and ideologically received ideas about violent forms of justice visited on the guilty woman’s body.”

To be accurate, these critics do not completely isolate or remove Rowlandson from the broader cultural, temporal, geographical, or societal structures in which she is currently located. Kolodny acknowledges that “the only terrain she can never negotiate on her own is the landscape itself,” and Logan references the ways in which Rowlandson’s text upholds or is subject to early American genre expectations. Yet while these readings of Rowlandson support complex interpretations of her sense of place, they tend to dichotomize position and location by collapsing the distinction between process and outcome. Her activities of knitting and preparing food in the wilderness are interpreted as finalities, and her efforts to delineate her self as woman and locate a stance from which she can communicate are understood as the terminal features by which she is defined. Rather, even while acknowledging the inherent agency within Rowlandson’s actions, her efforts to position her self might be read as simultaneously linked with a broader sense of outcome or locating structure.
Attending to Rowlandson’s position and location, however, suggests a reading of Rowlandson that critics such as MacNeil, Kolodny, and Logan subtly write against, namely that Rowlandson is a displaced figure. In considering position and location, Rowlandson is not firmly established in place by either means, but rather exists as a perpetually removed subject. Despite her efforts to position her self through domestic, economic, or spiritual means, and even though multiple locating structures influence her potential emplacement, Rowlandson remains inevitably removed across multiple levels of place.

More than a single entity, place is commonly understood as stratified or as consisting of multiple expressions, as explained by political geographer John Agnew, who argues that place is comprised of three interrelated layers: location, locale, and sense of place. According to Agnew, location represents the “objective macro-order,” a “geographical area” that defines places within a “wider scale.” Locales, interpreted as more regionalized or as smaller areas are the “settings in which social relations are constituted”; they are the “local social worlds of place.” At the smallest scale, sense of place indicates a “structure of feeling,” a “subjective territorial identity.” In a similar manner, Buell writes, “place gestures in at least three directions at once – toward environmental materiality, toward social perception or construction, and toward individual affect or bond.” Following Agnew’s and Buell’s lead, Rowlandson’s interaction with place occurs within a set of scaled and concentric areas. (To avoid confusion with the previously introduced pair of location and position, I will substitute “geography” for Agnew’s largest scale of “location.”) Regardless of which scale of place is examined, however, Rowlandson remains removed from place as she shuttles between location and position.

At the broadest level, an interaction between location and position occurs in relation to the two geographical sites of town and wilderness. Leaving Lancaster and before her captors construct camp on a hill outside of town, for instance, Rowlandson notices a “vacant house” that has been “deserted by the English.” Preferring a night’s stay in the house over sleeping on the exposed hillside, Rowlandson asks to “lodge in the house that night,” to which her captors respond by asking, “what will you love English men still?” In part, Rowlandson strives to position herself within a site associated with the town by asking to abide in the English house. In opposition to her captors, she attempts to negate their demands that she sleep in the open country. These bold actions might be interpreted as Rowlandson claiming a posture from which she can speak, but an analysis of her positioning efforts must also recognize the ability of her captors to locate her within their place, the wilderness. Yet even if her request was to be recognized, Rowlandson would have been emplaced in a site of a double removal. As a vacated house, the walls, doors, and building structure extract the house from the surrounding wilderness, and as a result of
being abandoned, left to elements of nature, the house is shifted away from associations with the town. Her request thereby reflects her actual position, within sight of the town and at the edges of wilderness, but removed from both. Rowlandson’s situatedness outside of place, her removal and displacement is further emphasized by the posture of her body in relation to the wilderness and the town.

On the first morning of her captivity, Rowlandson notes, “I must turn my back upon the Town, and travel with [the Nashaway Nipmucs] into the vast and desolate Wilderness.”26 Similarly, in preparing to return home eighty-three days later, she realizes, “I must go, leaving my Children behind me in the Wilderness.”27 In both instances, the text functions within a structure of spatial metaphors. The two sites of town and wilderness are posited as two poles, and each is separated and viewed as distinct from the other. Within this structured space, Rowlandson is situated in a particular relation to each site. By describing the pose of her body, Rowlandson pictures herself relative to either the town or the wilderness as she is first facing the wilderness by being turned away from the town and then later is turned toward the town by moving away from the wilderness. The space between town and wilderness is not described and goes unnamed. In one sense, Rowlandson is within a perimeter-type place, not quite in the wilderness and not fully within the town. Read differently, and by placing these citations as the bookends of her experiences, Rowlandson becomes situated in a space of removal from both the town and the wilderness as her back is turned to both sites.

The tension between position and location, which her body’s posture suggests, is also evident in the linguistic structure of the above sentences. The subject of each sentence, “I,” registers Rowlandson’s efficacy in positing her self. She is clearly the one performing the action in both cases, not her husband and not her captors. However, the auxiliary modal of “must” indicates the presence of another obligation that contextualizes her actions. Linguistically, Rowlandson is therefore defined within a deontic modality. Her presence is registered somewhere between “I” and “must,” and in this boundary, she is equally removed from both.

As Rowlandson is removed from the wilderness at the outset of her capture, so she remains detached from this geographical space throughout captivity. As the party initially prepares to cross the Connecticut River, Rowlandson attempts to step into the canoe, but “there was a sudden out-cry among them, that [she] must step back.”28 Similar to being moved away from the town or wilderness, Rowlandson is propelled back from the river by the cries of her captors. While her attempts to cross the river highlight her own actions, she is ultimately relocated by the desires of others. Even while surrounded by elements
of wilderness, therefore, Rowlandson becomes associated with ideas of removal from that place.

Rowlandson’s removal from place is therefore signaled in her relationships to particular geographic features and frequently marked by her physical posture as a subject seeking a position of self while also being located by other constraints. While her removal from geographical sites relates primarily to topographical markers, Rowlandson’s situatedness and her removal from place is equally evident in Agnew’s second sphere of place: locales of social interactions.

Many of Rowlandson’s interactions within locales, or sites of social relations, arise in conjunction with food. Toward the end of her captivity, for example, Rowlandson is invited into a wigwam for a meal of pork and ground nuts. While eating, another Native American scrutinizes an apparent contradiction between Rowlandson’s growing friendship with her captors and her lagging relation to her own soldiers. Speaking of the man who invited Rowlandson to eat, this Native American observes, “he seems to be your Friend, but he killed two Englishmen at Sudbury, and there lie their Cloaths [sic] behind you.”29

Rowlandson can be read as shaping her own position in this experience as she is literally facing away from her associations with the English colonies, sitting with her back turned to the soldiers’ clothes. Further, and in response to the accusations of friendship gone awry, Rowlandson does not automatically re-associate herself with her fellow colonists; she does not mention any grieving over the dead, and her reaction to her hosts vacillates between a mild repulsion over their murders and thankfulness for her food as she continually returns to this wigwam to refresh her “feeble carcass.”30 Rather than reinstate her previous relationship to her own culture by demonstrating loyalty to the dead soldiers, her commentary on this experience focuses on her safety and provision in the midst of violent and bleak circumstances. By each of these actions, agency might be ascribed to Rowlandson, particularly in that she continues to adopt a stance more akin to her captors than to her own culture.

Yet while Rowlandson seeks to demarcate her own position, the inquisitive Native American indicates that her moves are inauthentic, unwarranted, and perhaps even unwanted. Rather than granting her a space to resituate herself, her captor denies Rowlandson that opportunity, implying that she cannot fully break from the locating structures of the town, and that of an English colonist.

While Rowlandson’s position is challenged here by one of her captors, textual features of her narrative operate in a similar fashion. When the party stops to eat by a swamp early in her captivity, Rowlandson asks for horse liver, but her captor appears confused and responds, “What . . . can you eat Horse-liver?”31 She attempts to cook her piece, but when half is stolen, she eats the rest, uncooked, “with the blood about [her] mouth” and declares, “savory bit it was for me: For to
the hungry Soul, every bitter thing is sweet." Likewise, late in her captivity, Rowlandson wanders between wigwams, attempting to find some form of nourishment. In one, the "Squaw was boyling [sic] Horses feet" and offers Rowlandson a piece. She "quickly" eats her own piece, and after finishing more, comments that "savoury [sic] it was to my taste," for the "Lord made that pleasant refreshing, which another time would have been an abomination." Although Rowlandson seeks to position her self in opposition to her religion’s prohibitions by eating uncooked food that otherwise would have been an "abomination," textual features attempt to reposition her firmly within her association with the town by offering an explanation for her actions. Like the Native American who nudges Rowlandson back toward a relationship with her own culture, the text performs a similar function, arguing that while Rowlandson’s positioning actions link her with wilderness, she exists within and responds to the locating energies of town constructs.

In each instance, Rowlandson attempts to circumscribe her own position within particular places of social and cultural interactions and expectations. By partaking in the sustenance of her captors, Rowlandson’s actions can be interpreted as an expression of her own agency, a willingness and desire to align herself within the structures of a new social environment. However, either by the locating prowess of her captors or her own text, Rowlandson is deprived of that option. Rather than achieving a new position, Rowlandson is left displaced from both communities. Her unwillingness to grieve over the dead soldiers and her consumption of horse liver and feet removes her from the social codes of her colony while the assumptions of her captors and her textual explanations remove her from associations with Native American cultural constructs.

Yet despite this overwhelming movement toward displacement, one element remains open for Rowlandson to position herself: memory. Writing of a time in which she was in the wilderness, she claims, “I cannot but remember how many times sitting in their Wigwams, and musing on thing past, I should suddenly leap up and run out, as if I had been at home, forgetting where I was, and what my condition was.” In a similar manner, once Rowlandson returns home, her “thoughts are upon things past, upon the awfull [sic] dispensation of the Lord towards [them],” upon “the night season,” and upon “thousands of enemies, and nothing but death before [her].”

Although she is displaced geographically and removed from locales of societal and cultural constructs, Rowlandson, at least in part, establishes herself within a sense of place, Agnew’s third aspect. Within the dwelling sites of the wilderness and the wigwam, Rowlandson is able to strike a different position within memory, a move that resituates her within the town. Likewise, by thoughts of previous events, Rowlandson shifts away from the town to find a position in
the wilderness. In both instances, she is able to step away from her geographical and cultural markers and fuse into a different place by way of memory.

This move is incomplete however. In the wilderness, Rowlandson is quickly located again when she emerges from the wigwam, seeing “nothing but Wilderness and Wood,” finding herself in a “company of barbarous heathens.”

Once at home, her memories do not construct a completely new place, but are reliant on her culture’s conceptions of “night,” “enemies,” and “death.” Even in memory, therefore, while Rowlandson is able to hedge closer to establishing her own position, locating devices check her efforts. Infused with memories of town and wilderness, but unable to fully step outside of each, Rowlandson is left removed from both.

The experiences, emotions, and histories of the geographies, locales, and senses of place through which Rowlandson moves are primarily defined by aspects of removal. Captured by Wampanoag Indians, she is taken from Lancaster but not allowed to fully position herself within the territories of her captors. As often symbolized by the posture of her body, Rowlandson is frequently caught between places, and her attempts to resituate are repelled by her captors and later by her own text. Despite these removals from geographies and locales, Rowlandson retains traces of her home and her time in the wilderness by virtue of memory. However, now informed and defined by both places, she becomes unable to fully position herself in either. These gathered associations inform the displacement of Rowlandson and her lack of place that is accentuated by her imagining of place.

This attention to Rowlandson’s removal is more than an attempt to reshape the reading of a text according to a predetermined theoretical frame, for the analysis of this paper represents a reflection and an extension of a significant textual component of Rowlandson’s work. Throughout her narrative, Rowlandson portrays place and her relation to respective places as sites of removal as indicated by her running subtitles of “removes” throughout her narrative. As Richard Slotkin observes, “for Mrs. Rowlandson . . . time is marked not in temporal days but in ‘Removes,’ spatial and spiritual movements away from civilized light into Indian darkness.” Thus “removes” for Rowlandson indicates her sense of absence, a departure rather than a stationed presence. Yet Rowlandson’s use of removes marks more than a parting from Lancaster, for only half of the removes direct her away from the town, while the remaining removes designate her return trip. Even more, Rowlandson’s sense of removal from a given place is also indicative of her life outside the scope of her captivity in the wilderness, for as Neil Salisbury argues, “her entire life was punctuated by removes from one place to another.” Following her release, for example, Rowlandson notes that once a house was found in Boston, her and her family “removed from Mr. Shepards,” where they were currently living. Therefore, if the entirety of her trip into and
out of the wilderness, as well as her experiences beyond her captivity, are taken into account, Rowlandson’s use of “remove” not only signifies her effort to describe a departure from a given place or site, but also indicates a consistent imaging of place as sites of departure and displacement.

Rowlandson encounters and relates her experiences with multiple places throughout her narrative. More than an impassive backdrop wherein she travels, however, the qualities of those places inform significant aspects of her sense of self. Whether the emotions or experiences that have gathered in a particular place or the actions of imagining are taken into account, place is defined by removal; Rowlandson, in her associations with these places, is reciprocally delineated within frames of displacement. Her platial experiences do not carve out unique sites in which she is firmly emplaced, but her affiliation with place leaves her permanently removed, unable to reposition her self.

Notes

2. The Baquag River is now known as the Millers River.
3. Bachelard appears most interested in memories and in a psychoanalysis of how and where memories are positioned, but his general point applies to my argument here, that a fruitful study of individuals takes place into account. For a developed discussion of topoanalysis, see Bachelard, The Poetics of Space (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 8-10.
9. A similar concept is developed by David Simpson in his book Situatedness where he contends that situations include “outside forces that influence subjectivity. . . . But they are also open to . . . responses or reactions. . . . [Situations] are given to us but also open to amendment.” See Simpson, Situatedness (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 20.
11. Ibid., 7.
12. Ibid., 9-10.
15. Ibid., 259.
16. Ibid., 259.
19. For example, Doreen Massey in her article, “Power-geometry and a Progressive Sense of Place,” argues that “places do not have single, unique ‘identities’; they are full of internal differences and conflicts.” See Doreen Massey, “Power-geometry and a Progressive Sense of Place,” in *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*, ed. Jon Bird et al. (New York: Routledge, 1993), 67.
21. Ibid., 28.
22. Ibid., 28. Agnew’s “sense of place” parallels Bachelard’s contention that place is inhabited subjectively, that we experience it “in its reality and in its virtuality, by means of thought and dreams.” See Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 5.
25. Ibid., 70-71 (italics in original).
26. Ibid., 71 (italics in original).
27. Ibid., 104 (italics in original).
28. Ibid., 81.
29. Ibid., 101 (italics in original).
30. Ibid., 101.
31. Ibid., 81 (italics in original).
32. Ibid., 81 (italics in original).
33. Ibid., 96 (italics in original).
34. Ibid., 96.
35. Ibid., 88 (italics in original).
36. Ibid., 111.
37. Ibid., 88 (italics in original).
38. Ibid., 111.
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