



# Reading Acts 16:6–40 on the Edges of the Navajo Reservation<sup>1</sup>

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## THE GIRL ON THE BORDERLANDS

**I**t is a hot July afternoon on the Navajo Reservation in northern Arizona, the kind of day that flakes off your skin like a fine alkaline dust. My three brothers and two sisters, along with our father and his wife, have met at Immanuel Mission for a family reunion. It is the first time all of us have been together since our mother's death in 1984. Now it is eleven years later.

At this precise moment I am standing beside my oldest brother, Rob, at the grave of Sarah Tsosie, a Navajo girl with whom we grew up. Thirty years ago we were both in love with Sarah. At the age of fourteen, Rob's had been an open, reciprocated affection. I ought to know. I used to follow Rob and Sarah around after dark to watch them kiss behind the cinder block dormitory. My love, on the other hand, was that sweet, secret, unrequited type commonly found in the hearts of jealous, pesky little twelve-year-old brothers.

The intervening thirty years have taken us both far away from Sarah and the reservation where we spent our childhood. But now we are side by side at Sarah's hard-packed adobe grave, trying to say goodbye to someone—something—that was once simple, passionate, and young; full of grace and beauty.

<sup>1</sup>An earlier version of this essay appeared as "Changing Woman: Postcolonial Reflections on Acts 16:6–40," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 73 (1999) 113–135.

*Reading Acts 16 in conversation with experiences and literature of the American West offers new insights into how the old and new might creatively interact when they meet at significant cultural and religious borders.*

Rob and I are here, in the mission cemetery, just a stone's throw from the three-room mission school where our father taught for thirty years. We are standing here without speaking. We are standing here because of one of those generic conversations you start with siblings whom you haven't seen in eight years. It was a conversation I initiated a few hours ago.

I had just sat down at the lunch table next to Greg, my other older brother. "So," I began, "do you ever see any of the Navajo kids we used to go to school with?" I try to make conversation with the most laconic of my brothers, who has lived on the Navajo Reservation for twenty-five years.

"Do you ever see Sarah Tsosie? No other Navajo girl came close to her natural beauty. I haven't seen her since my college days when I would occasionally come home from Wheaton. Remember how mother used to say that Sarah had a 'cute figure'? It took me twenty years to figure out that was mother's fundamentalist Christian way of saying, 'Sarah is really sexy.'"

Greg pauses in the midst of eating a tuna sandwich and smoothes his mustache with his thumb and forefinger. "Yeah, we were probably all in love with Sarah at one time or another. I used to see her quite a bit. You know, her kids were in school here for a while. She was living over near Red Mesa Trading Post when we got word that she had died. She had had a drinking problem for a number of years. No one knows whether she drank herself to death or committed suicide. Maybe there isn't a lot of difference between the two. I know she died alone. Her body wasn't found for a few days. We buried her up there at the mission cemetery, just east of mother's grave."

Towering white cumulus clouds rise over the purple Lukachukai Mountains to the south, shrouding Sheepskin Mesa in grays and blues. A breeze suddenly stirs the afternoon air, raising northern Arizona's version of Middle Eastern whirling dervishes. The dust-colored pythonic spirits gather up the remnants of faded flowers and spin them across the cluttered mounds in the mission cemetery. Rob and I stand, silent, both caught up in the twists and turns of our own private memories.

Sarah was baptized at our mission when she was thirteen. Then she beat out my brother Greg by a tenth of a point for the highest honors in her eighth-grade class at the little mission school. But we all lost track of Sarah after graduation.

In the fall of 1966 Sarah Tsosie showed up as a junior at Shiprock High School, where my brothers and I had just transferred. Rob confided in me a few weeks later that he was beginning to get interested in her again. And I felt a strange stirring in my chest, a twinge of jealousy that I thought had died long before. But then we began to hear rumors. Sarah was "easy." "Better drunk than sober." We began to watch her guardedly, from a distance. She was different; not the same Sarah we had known in grade school. She didn't study anymore. She skipped classes. She had a look about her that said, "I know things that you haven't even dreamed of yet." And it was not a happy look.

Rob never did date Sarah. He said he couldn't stomach the kind of girl she

had become. And I barely spoke to her those last two years of high school. She was a senior, and I was a junior. She was Navajo. I was white. Things were different in Shiprock, a reservation border town of 1,500 people. Sarah was pregnant before she finished school and married a few months later. It was the first of four or five marriages, some more cruel than others.

Recently I have begun to think of Sarah Tsosie as Slim Girl, a central character in Oliver La Farge's classic 1930 novel about Navajo Indians. My brother Rob had a copy of La Farge's book, *Laughing Boy*, in his bedroom when he was in high school, and I know he had read it, because he told me that he liked it a lot. I suspect that Slim Girl reminded him of Sarah Tsosie, too. I wish I had read the book back then, but I didn't. I didn't know then that Oliver Hazard Perry La Farge became a well-respected anthropologist and spokesperson for Native Americans or that he had won the 1930 Pulitzer Prize in literature for *Laughing Boy* (Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* was a distant runner-up that year).<sup>2</sup>

Not long ago, on a rainy Thanksgiving weekend in Washington's San Juan Islands, I found myself in a used-book store, having forgotten to bring along something to read during the long Northwest evenings. I saw a copy of *Laughing Boy* on a shelf, bought the book, and read it over the weekend.

If La Farge has shown me that Sarah is a contemporary version of Slim Girl, my reading in American literature has convinced me that Sarah is also much more than that. She is also a variation of Native American border women like Pocahontas and Doña Marina (Malinche).<sup>3</sup> And as I shall argue below, she shares an identity with Lydia and the pythonic slave girl of Acts 16. To my way of thinking, Sarah is all these borderland women spun into one.

#### EVIDENCE OF IMPERIAL BORDERS IN MACEDONIA

For well over a hundred years now, biblical commentators have been content to call Acts 15:36–18:22 Paul's "second missionary journey." But unlike any of Paul's preceding or subsequent journeys, this one begins with a vision.<sup>4</sup> Some commentators have read the vision as a mirror of the book's author—Luke, himself, the Macedonian—calling to Paul for help. But few commentators today would be convinced by so naive a view of authorial allusion. And not just today: Origen argued centuries ago for a much different and more ideologically plausible identification. It is an identification that Walter Wink elaborates in his trilogy of books on the language of power in the New Testament. For Origen, and for Wink following in his interpretive footsteps, the Macedonian man in the vision represents the "angel" of the region,<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Oliver La Farge, *Laughing Boy* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1957). See D'Arcy McNickle, *Indian Man: A Life of Oliver La Farge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971) 58.

<sup>3</sup>Clara S. Kidwell, "Indian Women as Cultural Mediators," *Ethnohistory* 39 (1992) 97–107.

<sup>4</sup>Other programmatic visionary experiences in Luke-Acts are found in Luke 1:11–22; 24:4–11, 23; and Acts 9:10–16; 10:3–20; 22:17–21; 26:19; 27:23–25.

<sup>5</sup>Origen, *Homily on Luke*, 12, quoted approvingly in Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 32.

whose power could be challenged or assuaged by Jesus’ ambassadors. For them, this angel of Macedonia is comparable to the “prince of the kingdom of Persia” with whom an unnamed angel and Michael had fought centuries earlier (Dan 10:5–6, 10–14, 20–21; cf. Rev 2:1–3:22).

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*“Paul’s visions provide the divine authorization for a transfer of power”*

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In his commentary on this section of Acts, Charles Talbert collects a number of historical references to the dreams of Roman conquering heroes that provide an elaboration on Wink’s and Origen’s thesis. For example, Talbert notes how Suetonius (*Julius Caesar* 32) had “a dream before leaving Spain for Rome that he [would] have sovereignty over the whole world” and that “Drusus, the father of Claudius, [saw] an apparition of a barbarian woman, speaking in Latin, forbidding him to pursue the defeated Germanic tribes further” (Suetonius, *Claudius* 1).<sup>6</sup> Although Paul is no military leader, his vision in Acts appears to be programmatic, like those quoted above, and is consistent with the imperial ideology that underlies those visions. That is to say, the visions provide the divine authorization for a transfer of power. Furthermore, if Origen’s and Wink’s angelic identification is appropriate, then it makes perfect sense that one of Paul’s first acts in the new territory is to perform an exorcism (Acts 16:16–18). Following the lead of cultural anthropologists, John Dominic Crossan has argued that physical bodies are microcosms of the larger political systems which they inhabit.<sup>7</sup> Thus, in the symbolic universe of the Greco-Roman world, exorcisms in “foreign” territory become explicit political acts connecting political oppression with demonic possession (cf. Mark 5:1–17; 7:24–31). Surely, then, Luke Johnson has sensed the importance of the Acts scene when he says that “we find...[Paul] doing battle with demonic forces and besting them, *establishing in still another turf-war a further territorial gain* for the ‘kingdom of God’” (my emphasis).<sup>8</sup>

But not only is Macedonia marked out as *foreign* territory: it is also the *most explicitly Roman* territory that Paul has yet entered. The narrator in this section of Acts uses numerous terms for Roman power (κολωνία [NRSV “Roman colony,” 16:12], στρατηγὸι [NRSV “magistrates,” 16:20, 22, 35, 36, 38], ῥαβδούχους [NRSV “police,” 16:35, 38], ῥωμαίους ὑπάρχοντας [NRSV “Roman citizens,” 16:37, 38], along with the less explicit listing of such cities as Neapolis (“New City”) and Philippi (NRSV “the leading city of Macedonia”), which were important Roman settlements in the area. Significantly, this is also the first time in Paul’s journeys

<sup>6</sup>Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Acts: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (New York: Crossroad, 1997) 149; cf. Richard I. Pervo, *Luke’s Story of Paul* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 55.

<sup>7</sup>John D. Crossan, quoting Mary Douglas and other cultural anthropologists, in *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994) 76–77, 88–91.

<sup>8</sup>Luke T. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992) 297.

that Gentiles rather than Jews have been the instigators of opposition to his missionary activity.

These three elements—Paul’s vision, the exorcism, and the political language of Roman rule—all mark Macedonia as important, new, and foreign territory for Paul’s missionary activity. But it is primarily Paul’s encounter with the two women that marks the territory as a major border crossing in the book of Acts. And it is the author’s juxtapositioning of Lydia, the “good” woman, with the pythonic “bad” girl that offers American readers fruitful ways for understanding this disputed border.

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In an important monograph, Musa Dube Shomanah focuses her attention on those texts in the biblical tradition where there seems to be a connection between “bad” women and new (soon to be conquered) territory.<sup>9</sup> And although her primary attention centers on the story of Rahab (Josh 1) as the model for what she calls an ancient Hebrew “land possession type-scene,” she also discusses the Canaanite or Syrophenician woman (Matt 15; par Mark 7) and the Samaritan woman (John 4) as figures who fit into the same stereotypical pattern.<sup>10</sup> The elements that Dube Shomanah isolates in the type-scene are: (1) a traveling hero journeys to a foreign land, (2) meets a woman, (3) and bonds with her.<sup>11</sup> Although Dube Shomanah does not mention Lydia and the “spirit-possessed” girl in Acts 16 in her assemblage of biblical examples, I believe that these two women function in the same way as do the other three women—as a means to legitimize the ideological and territorial conquests of a nascent Christianity. But what is unique about the Acts text is the fact that it is the only biblical account where the reader finds *two* women on the border—one who is clearly a more positive character than the other.

Halvor Moxnes’s study of patron-client relations in Luke-Acts quite nicely describes the first woman, Lydia, as a representative of feminine propriety. She is “a patron who considers her benefactions as an act of reciprocity for the far greater spiritual benefits that she has received.”<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, the second female character, the prophetic “bad girl,” is typically described by commentators as one who has “prostituted her divinatory capacity for the benefit of her owners.”<sup>13</sup>

Lydia, the good woman, is from Thyatira, a city in the Roman province of Asia long noted for its purple dye industry. Similarly, the three border women who

<sup>9</sup>Musa Dube Shomanah, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St Louis: Chalice, 2000) 57–80.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 118–121.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>12</sup>Halvor Moxnes, “Patron-Client Relations and the New Community,” in *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, ed. Jerome H. Neyrey (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991) 262–263.

<sup>13</sup>Howard C. Kee, *To Every Nation under Heaven: The Acts of the Apostles* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity, 1997) 197.

precede her in the Christian canon are associated with blue-red colors: Rahab, the Canaanite, places a crimson thread in her window (τὸ σπαρτίον τὸ κόκκινον [NRSV “crimson cord,” Josh 2:18, 21 LXX]); the Canaanite, or Syrophenician woman lives in a land called reddish-purple (the proper noun “Phoenicia” [Φοινίκισσα], Mark 7:26, is derived from φοινικοῦς, “purple-red”); and the Samaritan woman, whose witness is associated with a harvest of white-headed grain (λευκοί [NRSV “white,” John 4:35–36]), prefigures the harvest among non-Jews (John 12:20–23)—a harvest that comes only through the death of the scarlet-hued seed (κόκκος [NRSV “grain,” John 12:24; cf. 19:2, 5]).

#### “CHANGING WOMAN” AS BORDER CHARACTER

Oliver La Farge’s novel, *Laughing Boy*, takes place on the Navajo Indian Reservation in 1915, seven years prior to the founding of the mission where I spent my childhood. La Farge recalls in the foreword to the 1962 edition of his book that he chose the year 1915 because “romanticism made him feel that he should cast back in time to a less corrupted, purer era....In the space of thirty years, however, the wholeness has gone.”<sup>14</sup> That loss of wholeness is represented in the book by the character Slim Girl, who marries Laughing Boy, the story’s protagonist.

Similarly to the four biblical border women described above, Changing Woman, a feminine deity in Navajo mythology, is also associated with blue-red colors. And this same complex of colors is what Slim Girl is wearing when Laughing Boy first sees her.<sup>15</sup> The color purple thus binds together these five women—the four ancient-eastern Mediterranean women and one western twentieth-century Native-American woman—in a weave of intertextual allusions.

Interestingly, Slim Girl is also a border woman, and she participates in the same ideology that gives life to Lydia and the pythonic slave girl of Acts 16. Like my childhood friend Sarah Tsosie, and like Lydia and the pythonic slave girl, Slim Girl is a person who *embodies* the ambiguous relationship of the colonized to the colonizer. Like Malinche in the conquistadores’ legends of Central America and like Pocahontas in the story of the founding of the British colonies in America, Slim Girl is a complex character.<sup>16</sup> But there is a twist in La Farge’s appropriation of the colonized border woman. For in his novel, told from the perspective of Laughing Boy, a traditional Navajo, the secondary character Slim Girl is the reader’s main contact with the white world. As the story develops, the reader learns that Slim Girl has been educated in a boarding school where she converted to Christianity. After her schooling she lived in a reservation border town where she worked as a prostitute. When she meets Laughing Boy, several years later, she is living on the edge of

<sup>14</sup>La Farge, *Laughing Boy*, 5–6.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 15–16; cf. 35, 50, 177.

<sup>16</sup>For an analysis of Native American border women in colonial literature, see Verena Stolcke, “Invaded Women: Gender, Race, and Class in the Formation of Colonial Society,” in *Women, “Race” and Writing in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker (London: Routledge, 1994) 272–289.

the border town in a house built by a Mexican man. From there she regularly travels to the town to meet with a white rancher who pays her for her sexual services. When Laughing Boy inquires about her activities in the town and the source of her money, she lies to him and tells him that she does housecleaning for a missionary family. Laughing Boy and Slim Girl soon marry, on the edge of the border town, far away from their own clans. With no family members present, Slim Girl procures a drunken medicine man to perform a traditional Navajo wedding ceremony.

Slim Girl, the border woman, is like the pythonic slave girl of Acts 16. She represents all things changing, new, and evil, and although she is not the subject of an exorcism, the tension in the novel revolves around the issue of power: the power of traditional Navajo ways (embodied by Laughing Boy), and the power of American colonialist ways (embodied by Slim Girl). The colors of Slim Girl's jewelry and clothing show that she represents Changing Woman in Navajo mythology. And if the reader somehow should miss this symbolic connection, La Farge has her say to Laughing Boy as she lies dying, "You have changed because of me; in you I shall live."<sup>17</sup> But for La Farge, Slim Girl's (or Changing Woman's) adaptation to American culture can only be seen as negative, a part of imperial American colonialism that will ultimately destroy even those who, like her, think they are powerful enough to twist American culture to their own ends.

By way of contrast, the male character Laughing Boy represents what is traditional, good, and pure in Navajo ways. Still, he desires the border woman and marries her against the advice of his relatives. But Slim Girl grows to love Laughing Boy and does not merely use him for her own ends. Like Lydia, she is wealthy, and with her money she procures the necessities with which to begin "traditional" life as a Navajo. She also willingly learns from her husband about the Navajo ways she had lost when she attended the Christian boarding school. But in the end Slim Girl, or Changing Woman, becomes one more victim sacrificed to American colonialism. Ultimately she embodies the colonial perspective that underlies most of the novel. For Oliver La Farge's colonialist perspective effectively disempowers any native voice that would attempt to dismantle that colonial power, since Slim Girl is killed at the end of the book. Thus the female, border-crossing character gives up her life to "save" Laughing Boy from the white man's ways. Fittingly for the era in which the book was written, she is murdered by a traditional Navajo man. Like the Lydia/slave girl double, Slim Girl/Changing Woman is the symbolic sacrificial victim who unwittingly allows American imperial power to continue to exert its control over the colonized Navajo.

I read *Ceremony*, Leslie Marmon Silko's 1977 novel, a few years before finding *Laughing Boy* in the San Juan Island bookstore. And in retrospect I realized that it reflects an important shift in the metaphorical status of the Native American border woman. Like Acts 16 and the novel *Laughing Boy*, *Ceremony* is set near a border town, Gallup, New Mexico, a few years after the end of World War II. Tayo, the

<sup>17</sup>La Farge, *Laughing Boy*, 177.

main character, is half-white, half-Laguna; a veteran who suffers from post-traumatic stress syndrome and returns to the reservation after he supposedly has been cured by white doctors. It is obvious to his family and friends that he is not well, and so his grandmother obtains the names of two native medicine men who might be able to help him. But it is not Ku'oosh, a medicine man from his own Laguna tribe, who cures him.<sup>18</sup> Instead an old Navajo medicine man named Betonie sets Tayo on the path toward healing and wholeness. Because Betonie lives on the outskirts of Gallup, a reservation border town, he is able to find traces of truth in the cultures of both the colonizer and the colonized. So he performs for the half-breed Tayo a healing ceremony that incorporates Tayo's two divergent worlds. It is a mixed-up, topsy-turvy ritual that sets Tayo on the road to wholeness. And throughout Tayo's journey toward wholeness, the color blue dominates.

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The novel's female characters, although many, are symbolized as one person: the ever mutating Spider Woman of Laguna mythology (or Changing Woman in Navajo mythology). Spider Woman is in the turquoise blue of the satin dress of Black Swan, a Mexican prostitute; Spider Woman/Changing Woman is in the blue of Mount Taylor, the blue swimsuit of the model in a Coca Cola calendar, the blue of the old medicine man's shirt, and the blue of the Ute woman's tight western pants. Spider Woman/Changing Woman's color is found in the most incongruous places. It functions as a kind of cultural hypertext, linking the reader to new perspectives and possibilities. In all these contexts the color blue reflects Silko's critical appropriation of the woman of the “borderland type-scene,”<sup>19</sup> a personage whom we first saw in the biblical tradition. But unlike La Farge or the author of Luke-Acts, Silko seems to be arguing that the colonizer's (or Christian) story can be used to benefit and heal the Native American if that story's power can be critically appropriated into the tradition of the native.<sup>20</sup> Thus, in Silko's reading of the border woman, she is empowered—even called—to engage her wits and creatively reappropriate the new and old in ways that American colonial power cannot imagine. Here, finally, the voice of the border woman is engaged: it talks back, it argues, it challenges. That voice is critically involved in active dialogue with the colonizer's ideology. *Ceremony* offers a lively voice to colonialist-engendered, endangered border women like Sarah Tsosie, Slim Girl, and Lydia and the pythonic slave girl, who otherwise remain co-opted, disempowered, or dead.

<sup>18</sup>Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Penguin, 1977) 33–39.

<sup>19</sup>Significantly, Tayo recalls a previous meeting with a mysterious woman (Spider Woman) precisely at the moment he is cutting through the barbed-wire fence that separates the reservation from a white man's ranch (ibid., 194; cf., 176–177, 183).

<sup>20</sup>This perspective is seen most clearly in Tayo's grandmother, who is able to mingle “all of creation [with] two names: an Indian name and a white name” and still see the underlying unity (ibid., 68–69; cf. 259–260).

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My reading of Acts 16:6–40 has been nurtured by my own lived experience on the Navajo Reservation and by my reading of two novels that deal with borderland characters. And it opens up for me a new way to understand Lydia and the pythonic slave girl of Acts 16. Where most commentators and missionizing folk write about the women separately, with Lydia as the positive role model and the slave girl as the negative role model for “native” responses to the gospel, my reading resists viewing them independently. Instead, the focus of my attention is on their paired geographical status as border women.

Since Lydia and the pythonic slave girl are the first people Paul meets in explicitly defined Roman territory, they also reflect the conflicted status of colonized peoples as helper and betrayer. But in describing Paul’s encounter with *two* border women, the author of Acts effectively deflects the reader’s attention from Paul’s role as theological master of the new territory and instead tries to force the reader to choose between the two opposing responses to Paul’s message. There is, therefore, no middle ground in this Acts text: Lydia, the good woman, welcomes Paul the conqueror, and the evil slave girl who challenges Paul is forever silenced. There is no place in this author’s narrative repertoire for more complex border women like Rahab, the Canaanite/Syro-Phoenician woman, or the Samaritan woman. And certainly there is no place in Acts for a borderland character like Silko’s half-breed Tayo, who struggles for survival on the edges of two different worlds.

Reading the two women of Acts 16 from a specific location in the American West offers a challenge to traditional interpretations of this text. Perhaps Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Spider Woman/Changing Woman* can function as an important supplement to Acts 16, a supplement that creates space for invigorating conversations with traditional biblical texts. In this new conversation, experiments in localized, contextualized exegesis might empower borderland minds, hearts, and voices to speak and act in fresh, enlivening ways to those in power who draw, maintain, and protect the borders. ⊕

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