

## ■ Gendered spaces in Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country*

SINEAD McDERMOTT

Dr. Sinead McDermott lectures in English and Women's Studies at the University of Limerick, Ireland.

*Abstract:* This essay focuses on Bobbie Ann Mason's 1985 novel, *In Country*, in order to explore some aspects of the relationship between gender and space. It argues that spaces are integral to the novel's plot and its representation of female subjectivity. Gender plays a part in how the novel's protagonists experience and occupy space, and spaces are also produced as gendered through representation. Focussing on public and private spaces, the road, and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the essay argues that such spaces are shaped by society's assumptions about gender, but they also serve to produce gendered subjectivities.

*Keywords:* Gender; space; body; road; Vietnam; memorial

*Resumo:* Este artigo enfoca o romance *In Country* (1985), de Bobbie Ann Mason, com o objetivo de explorar aspectos das relações entre gênero e espaço, ao defender que os espaços são parte integral do enredo do romance e de sua representação da subjetividade feminina. Gênero exerce um papel na forma pela qual a protagonista experimenta e ocupa espaços, e os espaços também são produzidos enquanto categoria generada da/na representação. Enfocando espaços públicos e privados, o artigo argumenta que tais espaços são forjados por concepções sociais relativas a gênero, e servem também para produzir subjetividades geradas.

*Palavras-chave:* Gênero; espaço; corpo; estrada; Vietnã; memorial



## Introduction

Since the 1990s, feminists working in a variety of disciplines including cultural geography, sociology, social anthropology and architecture, have reasserted the importance of space as an aspect of gender relations and, conversely, the importance of gender and sexual difference as aspects of social space. The geographer Doreen Massey, for example, follows the lead of David Harvey and Edward Soja in arguing for the imbrication of space, power and social relations; but she adds gender as a crucial ingredient that she believes is underplayed in their analyses. Feminist sociologists and anthropologists have considered the kinds of spaces that men and women occupy; how much space they are allocated; and how space is imbricated with power relations (Ardener, Spain, Wajcman), while feminists working in the fields of architecture and visual culture (Colomina, Pollock) have argued that spaces are themselves gendered and that “space is also produced as gendered through representation” (Rendell 103). Feminist philosophers have considered the meanings of space in relation to the space of the body itself: how men and women experience their own bodies in terms of physical mobility, their potential to have effects on the world, and the ability to manage and contain their own physicality (Bordo, Grosz, Young). In literary studies, critics have considered the importance of fictional spaces either as a set of constraints or of imagined possibilities for women, from Woolf’s desire for a “room of one’s own”, to the utopian “elsewheres” imagined by writers like Marge Piercy, Doris Lessing, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman (Villegas-Lopez and Dominguez-Garcia). In my essay, I want to add to this work by discussing the representation of gender and space in Bobbie Ann Mason’s 1985 novel, *In Country*. By considering the representation of spaces in this text and their meanings for the main protagonist, Samantha Hughes, and those around her, I hope to suggest some of the ways in which gendered subjectivity and social space interact and mutually constitute one another, and

how the relationship between gender and space is represented and refigured in literary fiction.

*In Country* is set amongst the working-class community of a small town in western Kentucky during the summer of 1984. Mason is interested in the mundane, everyday aspects of her characters' lives; what it feels like to be in their skin and see the world through their eyes. The novel employs minimalist narrative techniques alongside numerous references to brand names and popular culture, and has been variously described as embodying either a form of "new" or "dirty" realism, or of "low postmodernism" (Price, Simmons). Spaces are important to the plot of the novel from the outset. Samantha (Sam) Hughes is seventeen years old at the start of the novel and has just graduated from high school. The narrative begins as Sam tries to decide whether to stay in her home town of Hopewell or to move to the bigger city of Lexington to attend college. Sam's dilemma is thus one of location (should she move on or stay put?); a decision that takes on larger symbolic resonances: for Sam, staying in Hopewell means being stuck, in contrast to her own desire to "see the world" (Mason 7). Sam's dilemma is complicated by another factor: her sense that the Vietnam war, which ended some ten years previously, is continuing to affect her own life. She lives with her uncle Emmett, a Vietnam veteran who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder; while her own father died in Vietnam before she was born. In seeking to come to terms with her father's death and the significance of Vietnam for her own life, spaces also take on a special importance for Sam. The novel begins and ends with her journey to Washington to visit the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and the central part of the narrative follows her through a variety of spaces (the local McDonald's, friends' houses, the courthouse, the swamp) as she attempts to confront and resolve what happened to her father. One of the most important episodes in the novel occurs when Sam spends the night at Cawood's Pond, a swamp outside of the town, in an attempt to

imagine herself in the place of a Vietnam soldier “in country”. In the novel’s closing passages, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial takes on a larger symbolic role in the narrative, seemingly granting the possibility of healing and resolution to Sam’s quest. Thus, Mason’s novel in its very structure suggests the significance of spaces for the way in which we see the world and our place in it. It suggests that spaces have metaphorical significances attached to them: for example, the road symbolises escape, liberation, and self-reinvention for Sam, while the Veterans Memorial seems to offer healing, closure and an opportunity for Sam to reflect on her position as an American citizen.

As well as suggesting the significance of space for our sense of identity, Mason’s novel also raises interesting questions regarding the relationship between gender and space. In the nineteenth century, understandings of the gender/space relation were based on the ideology of separate spheres: the gendering of private, domestic space as feminine and of public space as masculine. As critics have argued, this division continues to exert an influence on how we perceive spatial and gendered relations, at the same time that changes in social relations mean that women’s roles in the public sphere (as producers and as consumers) have expanded in myriad ways (Rendell, Villegas-Lopez and Dominguez-Garcia). In Mason’s novel, Sam’s quest is located predominantly, although not exclusively, in public space: she goes to places like the local McDonald’s (where the veterans meet for breakfast) and the vets’ dance to find out more about the Vietnam war; and her road trip to Washington takes her through a series of public spaces (shopping malls, motels, diners, gas stations) on her way to the quintessential public and national space of the Washington Mall itself. Sam’s travels suggest that women are certainly not limited to the private sphere, but nonetheless her gender does make a difference to how she occupies public space, as I will suggest below. The representation of public spaces in the novel also suggests

that the distinction between public and private may not be sufficient to describe how spaces are used in the late twentieth century: for example, public spaces like McDonald's seem to function as semi-private spaces in the novel, extensions of the home for characters like Emmett and Sam herself, while the private space of the home is pervaded by public media in the form of television and magazines. Finally, despite Sam's mobility between public and private, Mason's novel suggests that spaces do still have gendered meanings attached to them: for example, the Veterans Memorial itself is "gendered" as feminine in the novel as compared to the "masculine" Washington Monument.

My essay addresses the theme of gendered space in Mason's novel in four main ways. In the first section, I look at how men and women experience their gender in relation to space, by discussing Sam's experience of her body and of the space around her, compared with that of her uncle Emmett and her mother Irene. I argue that Mason's representation of gender and space may seem counterintuitive in that Sam and Irene both seem to have a much stronger sense of power and agency in relation to space and the body than does Emmett. To trace how gender operates in relation to space in this context we also need to take account of other factors, such as social class, economic position and the modes of femininity and masculinity available to men and women in the mid 1980s. Second, I look at the various spaces Sam visits or occupies in the main part of the narrative, as she embarks on her quest for her father, Dwayne. I consider the ways in which these can be divided into public and private spaces, as well as into "masculine" and "feminine" spaces, and ask what the overlap between these two sets of binaries may be in the novel. In the third section, I look at Mason's representation of the road journey which frames the narrative. I focus here on the ways in which the road journey is gendered and classed in Mason's account, and consider the differences between this journey and more

traditional road narratives. Finally I discuss the significance of the Veterans Memorial with which the novel ends. The controversies over this memorial drew upon gendered discourses and Mason's novel makes this explicit in her representation of the memorial and its relationship with the Washington Monument behind it. However, I am also interested in what Mason suggests about the power of such a built structure: the memorial not only symbolises healing and closure in the novel but actually seems to effect it, and I am interested in considering how this occurs.

### **(i) Gender and Space**

In western culture, a strong association exists between woman and place and between woman and the home (Clarke, McDowell). The nineteenth-century ideology of separate spheres distinguished between a dominant public sphere of the city defined as male and associated with production, and a subordinate private sphere of the home defined as female and associated with reproduction (Rendell 103). As Rendell points out, while this ideology does not describe the full range of lived experiences of men and women within the city or the home, it nonetheless remains problematic, "because assumptions regarding sex, gender and space contained within this binary hierarchy are continually reproduced" (103). In Mason's novel, such traditional expectations regarding women and domesticity both persist and are subject to contestation. While for characters such as Mamaw, life revolves around the traditional needs of home and family, younger women like Irene aspire to a life and career outside the home, at the same time as still being positioned as "homemakers" within it. Female characters such as Sam's friend, Dawn, work outside the home as a matter of course, but are nonetheless interpellated into traditional feminine roles: Dawn takes responsibility for cooking and cleaning for her father now that her mother is dead. Sam herself seems to have partially evaded these ideologies: her unconventional home life living with her uncle has exempted

her from the demands of domesticity, and she also positions herself in opposition to traditional femininity in her refusal of expectations that she will marry young, have children, and settle down.

As a female protagonist, Sam is notable for her sense of agency and mobility. Critics such as Joanna Price have connected the character of Sam with Mason's earlier study of "girl sleuths" such as Nancy Drew. As Price explains, Mason "seeks for women a way of writing and of living which is not introspective and confined to interior space. The girl sleuths provide an early model of extroversion" (183), and like Nancy Drew, Sam is characterised by her mobility in space. We first meet Sam on the trip to Washington, when she is driving the car and not wanting to let Emmett take over. In the narrative as a whole, her character is defined by movement: she visits her friend Dawn, her boyfriend Lonnie, and both sets of grandparents; she walks to the local shopping centre; drives to the mall in Paducah; and travels both around the town centre (the courthouse, the vets dance) and to its margins (the swamp). While in part this is simply a narrative of her everyday activities, her movement is also dictated by her desire for information: she accompanies Emmett to McDonald's to talk to the other vets; she drives to the Hughes's farm to look for Dwayne's diary; she tries to climb up to the town's clocktower to see where Emmett once hung a Vietcong flag; and finally, she spends the night at Cawood's Pond in order to try to imagine what it was like for American soldiers in the jungles of Vietnam.

As well as this mobility in space, Sam is striking for her belief in her own agency and control of her body. She goes running every day, takes gym classes at school, and has a strong sense of her body (her appetite, her physique) as being under her own control. Sam believes that she can manage her body, either through physical exercise or through other technologies: she takes birth control pills and, when Dawn becomes pregnant unexpectedly, suggests that she should have an abortion. Her belief in

the possibilities of technology to alter the body is also suggested when she thinks that the overweight Mamaw could have an operation to remove her cellulite.

While Sam believes in her own agency in relation to the space she inhabits, the narrative also suggests some of the limitations and obstacles she faces in this regard. For example, from the start of narrative Sam wants a car. There are limits to what she can do and where she can go on foot: when she wants to bring Emmett to the doctor or go to the mall she has to rely on lifts to get to Paducah, the nearest big town. Without a car, she is confined mainly to the town limits of Hopewell itself. This is an economic problem – she cannot afford a car – but also a gendered one: as she observes, “boys got cars for graduation, but girls usually had to buy their own cars because they were expected to get married – to guys with cars” (Mason 58). While Sam experiences an empowering sense of freedom in her ability to run, here too there are certain impediments: on one occasion, a man follows her in his truck, so that she has to flag down another motorist to escape him. Similarly, while Sam believes she can control her own fertility, the character of Dawn, who becomes pregnant unexpectedly, also serves as a warning in the novel that the body can serve to restrict women’s mobility and their possible life choices.

As a female protagonist, then, Sam is an appealing example of female agency, and her belief in her power to act in the world is symbolised through her physical mobility. In comparison to traditional representations of femininity in terms of physical disempowerment, circumscribed mobility, and restriction to the domestic sphere, Sam presents an appealing alternative; although the narrative also suggests that certain constraints of class and gender still operate to circumscribe her possibilities.

Sam’s gendered identity can be usefully compared to that of her mother Irene. Irene has already rejected the potential entrapment of home by moving away from Hopewell to the bigger city of Lexington where she now

attends college. This does not mean that she has rejected domesticity per se: in fact she has remarried and had another baby, and revels in both her new house and her college course. But Irene is clear about her ability to move on, literally and figuratively: she does not wish to dwell on the past; is determined never to return to live in Hopewell, and refuses to be trapped any longer by the expectations of her home town. Like Sam, Irene is presented as an active, mobile figure in the narrative – she drives back to Hopewell for a surprise visit, for example – and she also enables Sam’s own mobility: giving Sam the money to buy a car of her own, and offering her the option of moving to Lexington to attend college. In the case of Irene, economic buying power “trumps” gender; with the caveat that Irene’s economic prosperity depends on her husband’s job and her willingness to readapt to the model of the nuclear family and domestic life.<sup>1</sup>

Expectations regarding gender and space are also reworked in the novel through the character of Emmett, Sam’s uncle. As the main male protagonist in the novel, Emmett is striking for his seeming lack of empowerment and agency with regards to mobility and physical space. Compared to Sam, Emmett is represented much more in relation to domestic space: he stays home more, minding his cat, cooking meals, or working to fix a leak in the basement. Like Sam, Emmett does not own a car, but unlike her, he is resigned to walking; and whereas she longs to get out of Hopewell, he deliberately reduces his life to a small number of locations and limited, set routines. Emmett also differs from Sam in terms of his sense of control and power over his own body. His body plays host to a set of random, unexplained symptoms including headaches, heartburn, and acne, which may be simple coincidence or may be due to the psychological or physiological traces of his time in Vietnam (the effects of exposure to Agent Orange, for example). Thus whereas Sam experiences her body as something under her control, which she can manage according to her own will, Emmett

<sup>1</sup> For this reason, Timothy O’Brien argues that Sam’s apparent willingness to move to Lexington at the end of the novel should not be seen as liberating. (188-9).

experiences his body as out of his control: he cannot predict when his symptoms will resurface. In addition, Emmett has less faith than Sam in the possibilities of technological or medical interventions to shape or alter the body for the better. He is reluctant to go to a doctor, suspecting rightly that his illnesses will not be taken seriously; and instead he adopts a fatalistic and passive response to his ill-health.

Emmett's experience of his body and of the space around him is one we might describe as a feminine or feminised experience of space. He is attached to the home; his physical mobility is circumscribed; and he experiences his body as something difficult to control and manage. As the novel makes clear, Emmett's responses here are closely linked to his experience of the Vietnam war: whereas the younger Emmett was apparently active and impulsive (as evidenced in his spontaneous decision to go to Vietnam in the first place), by the time of the events described in the narrative the long-term effects of post-traumatic stress disorder have reduced his sense of agency and activity.

In looking at the novel's characters in relation to gender and space, then, we can make a number of arguments. First, social class and economic position are as important as gender in terms of how the characters inhabit space: Dawn's and Sam's social class means that it is taken for granted that they will work outside the home, for example, although their social class also means they are more "stuck" in another respect, as it is harder for them to leave Hopewell. Irene's move up the social ladder through marriage has put her back into the house, but it also means that she can buy physical mobility for herself and for her daughter in terms of transport. Emmett's weak economic position (he does not have a job) affects where he can go and how he can get there, while his refusal of American normative values in terms of "getting on" and "having it all" also means that he does not aspire to social mobility and social status. In addition to the importance of social class and economic position, we could also suggest that the novel represents gender not simply in terms of a binary

opposition (masculinity versus femininity) but rather as a proliferation of masculinities and femininities. Sam's version of femininity is clearly one that is readily available to women in postmodern culture, being linked to consumerist models of choice and self-determination (Bordo). Emmett's masculinity is shaped by his experiences of Vietnam and also of the countercultural movements that emerged alongside the war: not only has he been "feminised" by his war experiences, but he also selfconsciously refuses to adopt the conventional models of masculinity on offer to him in American culture.

### (ii) Public and Private Spaces

Sam's quest in *In Country* consists of her attempts to find out more about her father, Dwayne, and about the Vietnam war. She complains that her mother never talks about Dwayne, and that no one around her wants to speak about Vietnam, trying instead to pretend that it never happened. Sam's quest for Dwayne is interesting because it necessitates engagement with both public and private spaces. The quest itself begins in the family home: in a casual conversation with Emmett, Sam discovers that her father named her; she makes phonecalls to Irene to ask about her father; and she retreats to her bedroom to look at the photograph of her father in his army uniform. To try to find out more, however, Sam increasingly moves outwards: visiting Anita in the hope that she can explain Emmett's symptoms; going to the McDonald's where the Vietnam veterans hang out; attending the vets dance; climbing the clocktower. Even her conversations with Emmett, where she tries to get him to speak about his memories of the war, increasingly occur in spaces outside of the family home.

While Sam's journey of discovery may take her outwards and away from the house, her key moments of discovery nonetheless all occur in private spaces. The first happens when she searches in Irene's old room for her father's letters home. In the process, Sam

uncovers memories of both her mother, and also of the father she never knew; although the Dwayne presented in the letters is unconvincing. In his letters home, Dwayne conforms to portrait of the good country boy, thinking about his wife and his Kentucky home, and barely mentioning Vietnam.

Irene's room is interesting as a space in the novel. It is associated with memories (of both Irene and Dwayne), with souvenirs of the past, and with junk. Irene's old clothes remain here, no longer fashionable; as do family mementoes such as old jewellery. The presence of Irene's music collection means that the room is also a memorial to the 1960s and the lost time of hope associated with the hippy movement. I would argue that Irene's room is gendered as "feminine" in the novel, for several reasons: because it is a private, domestic space; because it is the mother's room and filled with the attributes of femininity (clothes and jewellery); and because it is associated with the past and what has been discarded. According to Julia Kristeva, femininity can be defined as that which is positioned as marginal to the symbolic order, and in this respect this marginal, forgotten space is precisely a feminine space (Moi).

Sam's second moment of discovery occurs at her paternal grandparents' farm. The diary shipped home with Dwayne's personal effects after his death contains a much more personal, and also more disturbing, image of her father. In the diary, Dwayne writes about the day-to-day realities of living through a war. It is crude, violent, graphic and permeated by unpleasant and disturbing images, such as his description of the dead body of the enemy soldier, the "gook". The diary confronts Sam with the realities of war and of death. What is interesting for our purposes is that the visceral horrors of Vietnam also map onto the experience of the farm itself for Sam. The Hughes's farm is seen through Sam's eyes as backward and decaying: the dog suffers from mange; the cat's ears are cankered; rusty buckets are stuffed with dirty rags.

Her grandparents are, she believes, “ignorant and country” (Mason 206) and after reading the diary she cannot separate the two experiences:

Sam couldn't get the sensations out of her head: the mangy dog, the ugly baby, the touch-me-nots, the blooming weeds, the rusty bucket, her dumb aunt Donna. The cat with its ears clipped made her want to cry. And the diary disgusted her, with the rotting corpse, her father's shrivelled feet, his dead buddy, those sickly-sweet banana leaves. (206)

Like Irene's room, then, the farm is associated with the past: both in the sense that it preserves aspects of the past – souvenirs, memories, junk – and in the sense that it is seen by Sam as an outdated and forgotten space. Where Irene's room embodies positive aspects of the past (the hope of the hippies and 1960s counterculture) the farm is seen by Sam in much more negative terms, as backward, regressive, something to be left behind. We could argue that the farm too is a “feminine” space, in the sense that it is situated on the margins of the town and that it is literally marginalised: seen as a backwater. In this case, the feminine aspects of the farm are represented as abject and repulsive, associated with mortality and death. As Joanna Price argues, Sam is in flight from the maternal body in the novel, and the farm here represents exactly that feared, abjected aspect of corporeal femininity that Sam decries.

In her rejection of the farm and what it stands for, it is significant that Sam tries to find refuge in public spaces. When she finds Dwayne's diary she does not stay at the farm to read it, but goes to the mall in Paducah instead. Sam seems to be at her most comfortable in public spaces (in shops, diners, and burger joints) and one attraction seems to be – paradoxically – the privacy they offer her: the possibility of anonymity, compared to the cramped intimacies of family life. As when running, however, there are limitations to Sam's freedom here: in the shopping centre

at Hopewell, Pete insists in joining her at the diner; while in Paducah, “a man tried to pick Sam up . . . she gave him such a mean look that he backed off” (Mason 201).

Sam’s final moment of discovery occurs when she returns to Cawood’s Pond, the swamp on the outskirts of the town. The swamp, like the farm and Irene’s room, is a feminised space: marginal and semi-private. It is associated with past (named after the legend of an outlaw who hid out there) and is classified as unproductive and uncommodified space. As O’Brien argues,

Caywood’s Pond [sic] is the very image of one side of the novel’s primary set of oppositions. It is the feminine and indeterminant; it is a murky place that undermines expectations. It is the unknown realm over which the engineers, like the military in Vietnam, are trying to exert control by building a boardwalk as a public approach to it and ‘dredging the outer reaches of [its] swamp’ (208). (181-2)

For Sam, Cawood’s Pond is not exactly a memory site (nothing significant for her story happened there) and nor is it (like the farm or Irene’s room) a place where memorabilia of the past might be stored. Instead, she uses it as a place that can replicate the past: somewhere that might allow her to imagine what it would feel like to be “in country”. In spending the night “humping the boonies” (Mason 212) at the swamp, Sam hopes to go through something of what her father and the others went through in Vietnam, to finally know “what it was really like” there. In doing so, she both reasserts her gender difference (“women didn’t kill” (210)) and hopes to transcend it by going through what the male soldiers did. The swamp episode does not live up to Sam’s expectations: her fears of rapists/terrorists prove over-imaginative, and she does not succeed in replicating the Vietnam experience to her own satisfaction. Instead, as Emmett tells her, “you think you can go through what we went through out in the jungle,

but you can't . . . you can't learn from the past . . . there are some things you can never figure out" (220, 226).

In the course of the novel, then, Sam's quest takes her out of the family home, on wider and wider circles of exploration of her town and its margins. While she returns frequently to the public spaces in which she feels most "at home", her memory-quest also takes her to more marginal and privatised spaces where the past (forgotten or disavowed) may still linger. In terms of gender, Sam refuses conventional gender expectations in her mobility and her readiness to occupy public space. While public space is open to Sam as a woman, we could add the caveat that the spaces she occupies are thoroughly commodified (in the diner, the mall and the burger joints she frequents she is always positioned as consumer), and also that she is consistently made aware of her gender difference when occupying public space, particularly when she is there on her own. While Sam spends much of her time in the public spaces where she feels at home, several of the significant spaces that she visits in the novel, Irene's old room, the farm, and the swamp, could be better described as private spaces, in the sense that they are marginalised, forgotten, and outside of the realm of the commodity. The association of these spaces with the past, memories and the body serves to "gender" these spaces as feminine in the novel.

### (iii) Burning Down the Road

*In Country* both begins and ends with a road journey, as Sam, Emmett, and her paternal grandmother, Mamaw, travel from Hopewell to Washington in Sam's Volkswagen Beetle car. The novel opens with a comic section describing their trip, the purpose of which is still unclear; the narrative then moves back to Hopewell to describe the events of the preceding summer that have led up to this journey; and the final section of the novel takes up the story of the road journey again, culminating in their visit to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington city.

The road is an interesting space in its own right and in particular for its gendered conventions. While the road in American culture has been associated with freedom, experimentation, and a refusal of the constraints of society, it has also held strongly gendered associations (Clarke, Vice, Wolff). Films such as *Thelma and Louise* have deliberately played with these conventions, the scriptwriter Callie Khourie explaining her motivation for creating the script as follows: “I just got fed up with the passive role of women. They were never driving the story, because they were never driving the car” (qtd in Vice 212). Once women embark on the road the narrative possibilities for female protagonists also open up; and likewise, the narrative of the road itself cannot be the same: “the apparently blank, abstract space of the road becom[es] full of a charged meaning when gender enters the picture” (Vice 212).

The road journey in *In Country* explores what happens when particular bodies – gendered, classed, aged and each burdened with their own history – are put in motion in a road narrative. The novel opens with the words “I have to stop again, hon” (Mason 3) and the comedy of the first section stems from Sam’s impatience with her grandmother’s demands versus her own desire for onward motion. Considering that she speaks the opening words of the narrative, Mamaw’s role in the novel tends to be under-discussed by critics. In this opening section, she symbolises all the aspects of the body – as unmanageable, uncontrollable, and entrapping – that Sam would seek to reject. In comparison to Sam’s self-disciplined and self-fashioned body (the muscles on her arms testament to her exercise regime), Mamaw’s body is overweight, shapeless and hard to control; she even has to sleep in a special brassiere at night. Mamaw represents the aspects of the feminine body, or more precisely the maternal-feminine body, that Sam recoils from: her body bears witness to her age, to her social class, and to the work of reproduction. In presenting us with the character of Mamaw from the

start, then, Mason suggests another discourse – that of social forces shaping our bodies and lives – to set against the discourse of freedom and choice espoused by Sam herself. This is reinforced in the opening section by Mamaw’s association with ageing, illness and death: she is the one to hint at the purpose of their journey, in her story of the Gold Star Mother, and re-reading the novel’s opening once we know about Dwayne, we can read her body as carrying the legacy of her grief as well.

In addition to Mamaw’s needs and demands, Sam must contend with other obstacles on her road journey. The journey is hindered not just by Mamaw asking to stop frequently, but also by trouble with the transmission on Sam’s eleven-year-old car. Having to stop en route to get the car repaired, Sam, Emmett and Mamaw have to worry about where to stay, how much the rooms will cost and whether they can afford to eat in the hotel restaurant. The road journey as presented here, then, is not an escape from responsibilities and everyday life; or rather, escape is predicated on having the financial means to pay for it.

At the same time, the road does “work” for Sam: it lives up to her fantasy of “seeing the world”. For Sam, this is indeed “America the beautiful” (231); someplace you might want to “get lost in” (6). The spaces where they stop – motels, diners, shopping malls and gas stations – are bigger and better than those in Hopewell: the consumer choice larger, the rooms nicer. As in her trip to the Paducah Mall, public spaces continue to act as comfortable homes-away-from home for Sam, their attraction lying precisely in the way they both make her anonymous and link her to a wider world: she likes the cleanness of their motel room, but also the knowledge of all the other people who have stayed there, “a secret history of thousands of people, their vibrations and essences soaked in the walls and rug” (12). In this respect, Mason does not simply dismiss Sam’s aspirations and desires in the novel: the road, travel and transient spaces do indeed offer Sam possibilities beyond what was available to her

in Hopewell, including the option of anonymity and of engaging with a wider set of humanity.

Sam's road journey also, of course, has a purpose beyond simply setting off in search of adventure or an encounter with America. Although the purpose of the journey is not made explicit in the first section of the novel, we realise at the end of the second section that Emmett, Sam and Mamaw are travelling to the Veterans Memorial in Washington, and that the journey is thus a kind of culmination to Sam's quest for information about her father Dwayne. We also discover that the trip has been precipitated not by Sam herself but by Emmett: in the aftermath of the night at Cawood's Pond, Sam and Emmett have "changed places" (229): he takes on the role of instigator, propelling the action, while Sam herself becomes lethargic and apathetic, suffering (as she tells herself) her own form of post-traumatic stress disorder. Rather than a classic road journey in search of adventure, then, the road trip in *In Country* might be better described as a kind of pilgrimage: a journey of memorialisation and mourning. This retrospective knowledge helps to make sense of the rather ambivalent tone of the first section, which moves between comedy and a more poignant sense of loss: on the first page, for example, we're told that Sam "notices a hillside with some white box shapes – either beehives or a small family cemetery – under some trees" (3), while the section ends with all three characters thinking about what they miss ("Moon Pie", "home", "Tom") and with Sam's wish that the next day wouldn't come: "she dreads going to Washington" (20).

#### **(iv) The Vietnam Veterans Memorial**

Both the novel *In Country* and the film adaptation of the same name have been invoked by critics in the discussion of larger questions about historical and cultural memory, the place of the Vietnam war within American culture, and what it means to be an American citizen (Berlant, Grewe-Volpp, Sturken). The visit to

Vietnam Veterans Memorial (the VVM) with which the novel concludes tends to take precedence in these discussions, to the extent that *In Country* has become part of the cultural discourse around the Memorial itself. It is interesting to think about relationship between Mason's fictional text and this physical artefact. If the Veterans Memorial is an act of memorialisation, so too is Mason's novel. On the other hand, we could say that the VVM, like *In Country*, is itself a text: a marked surface, inscribed with the names of the dead, to be read and reread by those who visit it, and a text that is put into juxtaposition with other texts (for example, visitors routinely trace the names onto pieces of paper, and also leave letters and notes at the wall) (Griswold). Indeed, Griswold comments that the shape of the Memorial "iconically represents a book. The pages are covered with writing, and the book is open partway through" (708).

The Memorial is also interesting for our purposes because of the gendered discourses surrounding it. As Grewe-Volpp points out, the plan for the Memorial was initially the focus for much public hostility. Its sunken aspect (the two walls of the memorial are embedded in the earth) was seen as defeatist, while "the V-shape of the walls . . . was denounced as symbolizing the victory sign for the war resisters, or as standing for violence, victim, or, even worse, 'a female V, reminding us that a 'gash' is not only a wound but slang for the female genitals'" (Grewe-Volpp citing Sturken 176-7). For critics, then, the memorial failed to embody a patriotic or heroic tribute to the war, and criticisms of the design were frequently couched in sexist terms, referring to the Memorial as a "black gash", a "black hole" or a "black pit" (qtd in Haines 207). In the context of the Washington Mall, the Memorial certainly contrasts strikingly with the "blatantly phallic" form of the Washington Monument (Griswold 695). As the Memorial's designer, Maya Lin, explained:

In a world of phallic memorials that rise upwards, it certainly does [betray a feminine sensibility]. I didn't set out to conquer the earth, or overpower it, the way Western man usually does. I don't think I've made a passive piece, but neither is it a memorial to the idea of war. (qtd in Grewe-Volpp 177)

While Lin's comments here might suggest that her gendered subject position affected the finished design, commentators also point out that the design criteria for the memorial had already made it explicit that it was not intended to glorify war: the memorial was supposed to be "reflective and contemplative in nature", refraining from making any 'political statement regarding the war or its conduct'" (qtd in Haines 206).

The gendered discourses surrounding the VVM are foregrounded in Mason's novel. The Memorial is first mentioned in the novel by Tom, who describes it as "a big black hole in the ground, catty-cornered from that big white prick. Fuck the Washington Monument. Fuck it" (Mason 80). When Sam approaches the Mall, the first thing she notices is the "gleaming pencil" (238) of the Monument, before she comes upon the "black gash" (239) of the Memorial. Indeed, Sam's language in describing the Memorial seems to repeat the negative discourses of critics of the VVM: it is "a black gash in a hillside", a "black wing embedded in the ground" or even a "giant grave" (239). In Sam's case, Mason seems to be trying to articulate the shock of encountering the Memorial for the first time, and the sudden confrontation with death which it symbolises. The language used to describe the Memorial here also links it to other sunken, dark spaces in the novel, such as Cawood's Pond, and thus, as Timothy O'Brien points out, to the novel's play with binary oppositions between elevation and depression, flight and groundedness, masculine and feminine.

As well as suggesting the shocking, disconcerting nature of the Memorial and what it symbolises, *In Country*

also appears to testify to the Memorial's ability to provide healing and closure to those who visit it. Maya Lin has stated that she wanted the memorial "to bring out in people the realization of loss and a cathartic healing process" (qtd in Price 185), and many commentators have noted the Memorial's "remarkable therapeutic capacity" (Griswold 709).<sup>2</sup> In Mason's novel, all three protagonists achieve some kind of resolution to their quest at the Memorial. Finding Dwayne's name on the wall allows both Sam and Mam to grieve for his loss, while Emmett remains meditatively in front of the list of names, apparently reflecting on his memories of the dead. Some critics have also suggested that the novel's ending allows Sam to come to terms with her own inside the Memorial:

<sup>2</sup> As Sturken and Grewe-Volpp point out, this catharsis could be said to occur at the expense of a confrontation with guilt and responsibility: the Memorial's emphasis on healing may evade deeper political questions of both the American soldiers' responsibility for their actions, and of the reasons for the war in the first place.

Sam stands in the center of the V, deep in the pit. The V is like the white wings of the shopping mall in Paducah. The Washington Monument is reflected at the center line. If she moves slightly to the left, she sees the monument, and if she moves the other way she sees a reflection of the flag opposite the memorial. Both the monument and the flag seem like arrogant gestures, like the country giving the finger to the dead boys, flung in this hole in the ground. Sam doesn't understand what she is feeling, but it is something so strong, it is like a tornado moving in her, something massive and overpowering. It feels like giving birth to this wall. (Mason, 240)

In this cathartic moment, Sam ends her attempt at identification with the male soldiers (the "dead boys"), and instead acknowledges her own subject position as a mourner. Her fantasy of "giving birth to this wall" suggests that she has finally reconciled herself to the maternal-feminine body that she previously repudiated (Grewe-Volpp, Price).

The visit to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial at the close of *In Country* has a number of implications for my

argument. First, the VVM is a good example of the close relationship between society and space. It is a product of its society in the sense that it is a built space, but also because it is mediated by the discourses of that society: the contested ideas about heroism, war, patriotism and mourning which mark its planning and construction as well as its reception. As Sturken and others suggest, such discourses also have deeply gendered meanings: early resistance to the Memorial made use of a sexist vocabulary (the “black gash”) in order to denigrate it. While such discourses were intended as derogatory, Mason’s novel reappropriates them in order to revalorise both the Memorial and the feminine. Second, the VVM also shows how spaces can shape the social relations within them. The Memorial seems to make it possible for those who visit it to undergo a therapeutic catharsis and hence regain a sense of national collectivity and community. In terms of Mason’s characters, the Memorial enables resolution, healing, and, literally, an ending – however provisional. In terms of gender, Mason’s novel suggests that the memorial allows characters like Sam to reappraise their own sense of themselves as gendered subjects. Sam’s feeling that she is “giving birth to the wall” suggests that she has resolved her relationship to her own femininity, and especially to the maternal body which she rejected earlier in the novel.

*In Country* allows us to reflect in an interesting way on the relationship between space, social relations, and gender relations. It illustrates some of the ways in which we, as gendered subjects, occupy and experience space. It also suggests some of the ways in which spaces are themselves gendered and how (in Rendell’s words) “space is also produced as gendered through representation” (103). Finally, the encounter between the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and Mason’s novel raises interesting questions about the relationship between a work of literary fiction and the gendered and spatial relations that it represents. As a literary fiction, *In Country* not only portrays the Memorial and the social relations and

discourses imbricated with it; it also intervenes and participates in those relationships. How we think about the Vietnam war and its public memory sites, or more generally about social and spatial relations in the United States, is shaped by this novel too.

## Works Cited

- ARDENER, Shirley, ed. *Women and Space: Ground Rules and Social Maps*. Oxford: Berg, 1993.
- BERLANT, Lauren. *The Queen of American Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke UP, 1997).
- BORDO, Susan. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. 1993. Berkeley: U of California P, 1995.
- CLARKE, Deborah. "Domesticating the Car: Women's Road Trips." *Studies in American Fiction* 32:1 (2004): 101-28.
- COLOMINA, Beatriz, ed. *Sexuality and Space* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992).
- GREWE-VOLPP, Christa. "'Memory Attaches Itself to Sites': Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country* and the Significance of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial." *Amerikastuden / American Studies* 49.2 (2004): 173-88.
- GRISWOLD, Charles. "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Washington Mall: Philosophical Thoughts on Political Iconography." *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1986): 688-719.
- GROSZ, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1994.
- HAINES, Harry. "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial: Authority and Gender in Cultural Representation." *Vietnam Images: War and Representation*. Ed. Jeffrey Walsh and James Aulich. London: Macmillan, 1989. 205-09.
- MASON, Bobbie Ann. *In Country*. 1985. New York: Perennial, 2001.

- MASSEY, Doreen. *Space, Place and Gender*. Cambridge: Polity, 1994.
- MOI, Toril. "Feminist, Female, Feminine." 1986. *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*. Ed. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore. London: Palgrave, 1997.
- O'BRIEN, Timothy D. "Oppositions in *In Country*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 41:2 (Winter 2000): 175-90.
- POLLOCK, Griselda. *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- PRICE, Joanna. "Remembering Vietnam: Subjectivity and Mourning in American New Realist Writing." *Journal of American Studies* 27:2 (1993): 173-86.
- RENDELL, Jane. "Introduction: Gender, Space." *Gender Space Architecture: An Interdisciplinary Introduction*. Ed. Jane Rendell, Barbara Penner and Iain Borden. London and New York: Routledge, 2000: 101-11.
- SIMMONS, Philip E. *Deep Surfaces: Mass Culture and History in Postmodern American Fiction*. Athens and London: U of Georgia P, 1997.
- SPAIN, Daphne. *Gendered Space*. Chapel Hill, NC: U of North Carolina P, 1985.
- STURKEN, Marita. "The Wall, the Screen, and the Image: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial." *Representations* 35 (1991): 118-42.
- VICE, Sue. *Introducing Bakhtin*. Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 1997.

VILLEGAS-LOPEZ, Sonia and Beatriz Dominguez-Garcia.  
"Foreword." *Literature, Gender, Space*. Ed. Sonia Villegas-  
Lopez and Beatriz Dominguez-Garcia. Huelva: Universidad de  
Huelva, 2004: 11-13.

WAJCMAN, Judy. "The Built Environment: Women's Place,  
Gendered Space." *Feminism Confronts Technology*. Cambridge:  
Polity, 1991: 110-36.

WOLFF, Janet. "On The Road Again: Metaphors of Travel in  
Cultural Criticism." *Resident Alien: Feminist Cultural Criticism*.  
Cambridge: Polity, 1995: 115-34.

YOUNG, Iris Marion. "Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology  
of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality." *The  
Thinking Muse*. Ed. J. Allen and Iris Marion Young.  
Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989: 51-70.