Teaching Lawrence in New Mexico: Contested Journeys

@Feroza Jussawalla

Professor Emerita of English

University of New Mexico

fjussawa@unm.edu

New Mexico provides a unique opportunity for teaching students to appreciate and learn about D.H. Lawrence, possibly in much the same way, perhaps, as Nottingham does: seeing where the author lived, some scraps of his belongings, archival materials, etc., all of which make him seem familiar, and knowable, perhaps. But it also affords an opportunity to teach about a culture that is not their own. You would think that in the age of the internet, when everyone seems to be able to learn about cultures, easily, from across oceans, the culture gap would not be an issue. And yet it is.

The "culture gap," is even more heightened, as increasingly, more and more students are coming prepped by what has controversially come to be called, "Critical Race Theory." Native, Hispanic and "Liberally" (I use this with caution, as I do see myself as one of the 'liberals,'), educated young people ask, why Lawrence was here, what were his perspectives, how could he dare to speak for the indigenous peoples. Having the opportunity to take students up to the ranch and show them, that Lawrence was just an ordinary person, like some of their own ancestors who came to New Mexico and lived an ordinary life, and that indeed he meant well in speaking for the natives even if his language seemed critical or alienating, makes a great deal of difference.

Lawrence thought that by coming to New Mexico, he had fallen onto "another planet." He wrote,

> And here I am, a lone lorn Englishman, tumbled out of the known world of the British Empire onto this stage: for it persists in seeming like a stage to me and not like the proper world. (*IE*,92),

My students think, that the world of Lawrence, even though in New Mexico, is another world for them. Something English is hard enough for them to comprehend. (I once had a Native American student tell me she just couldn't read or understand *Alice in Wonderland*.) They cannot enter into the world of his thinking, or that of Mabel Dodge Luhan, who increasingly seems like a settler colonial. For my "white" American students, making connections to their own settler

backgrounds, often helps them understand what is almost a "homesteading," impulse in the Lawrence that moved up to the Kiowa ranch.

Add to this situation, the current conflicted climate of controversies. Increasingly, teaching British literature is getting to be difficult. It is unfamiliar, and now in the current climate not just of Black Lives Matter, (which is not to denigrate the movement) and that of the debates around Critical Race Theory, students are coming prepped to reject all things English, as colonialist. British literature is associated with the colonizer. And now, particularly after the discovery of the Indian/ Native American children's graves in Canada, the anti-colonial feelings, as seen in the toppling of the statues of Queen Victoria and of Queen Elizabeth, are not only high, but immediately invoked. Making the case for someone who came to New Mexico and made it his, is to raise the issues of cultural appropriation. Therefore, even as we make our journey through the Lawrentian canon, it has been important for me to take students up to the Kiowa ranch, in Lawrence's footsteps, to show that he was just "human," making his way through difficult circumstances, just like their family may have, tending to his cow, living in a small cabin, dependent to some extent on his patroness.

However, there is also an additional factor: which is to show that Lawrence himself embodied some of the philosophies of the "Occupy" movement, an anti- Americanness, a critique of the wealthy his support for the indigenous people, despite the vocabulary that he described them through.

First of all, here is Lawrence, the "rebel," writing, in German, about Mabel, to Frieda's mother, on December 5, 1922, sounding very much like the "rebel," our students want to be:

> You have asked about Mabel Dodge: American, rich, only child, from Buffalo on Lake Erie, bankers, forty-two years old, has had three husbands—one Evans (dead), one Dodge (divorced), and one Maurice Sterne (a Jew, Russian, painter, young, also divorced). Now she has an Indian, Tony, a stout chap. She has lived much in Europe—Paris, Nice, Florence—is a little famous in New York and little loved, very intelligent as a woman, another "culture carrier," likes to play the patroness, hates the "white world" (quotation marks mine) and loves the Indian out of hate, is very generous," wants to be a witch, and at the same time a Mary of Bethany at Jesus's feet—a big white crow, a cooing raven of ill omen, a little buffalo.
>
> The people in America all want power, but a small personal base of power: bullying. They are all bullies.
>
> Listen Germany, America is the greatest bully the world has ever seen. Power is proud. But Bullying is democratic and base.

> *Basta*, we are still friends with Mabel, but do not take this snake to our bosom. You know these people have only money, and because all the world wants money, all the money, America has become strong, proud and all powerful.

He hints at the "do-good" liberals who hate the white world, to "go native," or espouse causes out of "superfluous," "political correctness." The anti-capitalist rhetoric we are hearing today is very much that of our innocent Adam in the American world that Lawrence was in.

Thus, I tend to talk about Lawrence's journey into New Mexico and up the road to the ranch as a *bildungsroman* journey. A journey in which Lawrence finds himself and connects with the land and peoples of New Mexico and Mexico while all the time looking at them through his arched perspective. While the *bildungsroman* is usually seen as a coming-of-age story or novel, associated with a very young man or woman's coming into self-knowledge, I here (re)define it to include the story of D.H. Lawrence, the author, as told by him, in and through his writings. I posit that Lawrence's growth into himself, occurs not as a young man in the mid-lands, as in the actual bildungsroman novel, *Sons and Lovers*, but in the landscape of New Mexico and Mexico. Tracing Lawrence's journey away from the "metropole," England and its center, London, to the far-flung periphery of New Mexico, tells the story of D.H. Lawrence creating a sense of belonging as a "transnational subject."

Martin Swales describes the *bildungsroman* as "a highly self-reflective novel, one in which the problem of the *bildung* of personal growth is enacted in the narrator's discursive self-understanding." It is in how Lawrence *narrates* his own journey towards self-understanding, through various writings about New Mexico, that we can see how this "lone, lorn, Englishman," "finds" himself away from England and its metropole. While his "grand tour" of many travels, is not one of fancy steamer trunks and Limoges, it is one of constant self-awareness as he interacts with culture upon culture, and absorbs from them.

In *Lorenzo in Taos,* Mabel Dodge Luhan tells us that Lawrence was afraid of encountering the "artsy" community in Taos. Thus, he moves even further away to the Kiowa ranch and out to the furthest periphery in Mexico. In *The Plumed Serpent* his ruminations on the indigenous peoples show how far away he wants to go from anything London and British in search of knowing and developing a "sense of self," not only for himself, but in an attempt to create a new religion.

Through juxtaposition and opposition, D.H. Lawrence finds himself in New Mexico and is at home with himself in his connections to indigeneity, and indigenous peoples, while at the same time that he may seem scornful of them. Connecting with the indigenous is a repeated refrain or theme. It seems that Lawrence keeps searching for the "tuatha de dannan," the connection to indigenous gods whether in Cornwall or through Kate in *The Plumed Serpent.* And yet as Ross Parmenter shows so aptly in his book *Lawrence in Oxaca,* Lawrence also seems to be holding on to a sense of Englishness, rather tenuously. In this, Lawrence is crafting a new

transnational hybrid self, while creating “inter-cultural” works, and himself undergoing a transcultural process of rejecting the metropole.

When Lawrence came to New Mexico in 1922, at the invitation of Mabel Dodge Luhan, he felt like a true foreigner. But bit by bit, Mabdel Dodge Luhan’s husband Tony Luhan grew on him. Mostly, New Mexico began to grow on Lawrence. The vast blue skies, the rituals and the dancing of the native peoples enchanted him and his German wife Frieda. When, Mabel Dodge Luhan gave him a ranch outside of Taos, called the Kiowa ranch, Lawrence made himself a home there. But it is there that he began to connect with indigenous spirituality. The religion of the Native peoples began to make great sense to him. So much so that he went to Mexico, to write his magnum opus, *Quetzalcoatl* later developed into *The Plumed Serpent* in which he endeavors to create a new religion, a melding of his version of Christianity, Mexican Christianity and Native spiritualities. In doing this he finds himself. Moving as far as he can from the Christianity he was raised in, he writes, “If god must come, he must come in *huraches* and a serape.”

Attempting to show this in actuality to my students, helps them feel connected to him. Thus, it is that we can say that D.H. Lawrence’s journey to the U.S. and among the native peoples of the southwestern region, leads to his knowledge of himself as a new born individual, but also to my students who can see how two different cultures can connect rather than be polarized.

Works Cited

Lawrence, D.H, “Indians and an Englishman,” in *Phoenix*, ed. Edward D. McDonald. New York: The Viking Press, 1936. pp.92-99.

Lawrence, D.H. *The Letters of D. H Lawrence, Volume IV*, ed.,Roberts, Boulton, et al., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987 pp 351