
Mapping the ‘Red Atlantic’ in Contemporary Native American Fiction

Lori Merish*¹

¹Georgetown University – United States

Abstract

”Mapping the ‘Red Atlantic’” examines versions of cosmopolitanism and trans-Atlanticism inscribed within an important recent work by a major Native American novelist: Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Gardens of the Dunes* (2000). A historical novel set in the late nineteenth century, a critical period in Native American history, *Gardens of the Dunes* maps the complex itinerary of a Native American female character who travels between the United States and Europe. My talk will address the issue of how Native American writers envision the Atlantic world in order to counter persistent racial stereotypes (especially stereotypes of Indian “savagery” and exclusion from history and “progress”) and to engage with and critique cultural definitions of modernity. According to Cherokee scholar Jace Weaver, from the earliest moments of European/Native contact in the Americas, Indians, “far from being marginal to the Atlantic experience, were, in fact, as central as Africans. Native resources, ideas, and peoples traveled the Atlantic with regularity and became among the most basic defining components of Atlantic cultural exchange.” The transatlantic border-crossings envisioned in Silko’s novel evoke earlier itineraries in the “Red Atlantic”: those of Native American slaves transported by Spain, France and Britain and sometimes back again; Native seamen, whose prominence in whaling crews in the 18th and 19th centuries is captured in the fiction of Herman Melville; and Native diplomats. The text enables us to glimpse the rich history of Native Americans as actors in what Weaver calls “the transoceanic story.” *Gardens of the Dunes* is centered on a young protagonist, Indigo, one of the last survivors of a fictional Colorado River tribe known as the Salt Lizards; the novel’s title refers to the Salt Lizards’ spring-fed tribal home, where they grow a variety of vegetables and flowers. Indigo and her sister are captured by soldiers and sent to an Indian boarding school in southern California; Indigo manages to escape from the school and then befriends a young white couple, Hattie and Edward Palmer, who invite Indigo to live with them. The Palmers bring Indigo on a journey to the east coast and then across the Atlantic to England, Italy and Greece. The narrative thus subversively rewrites the nineteenth-century “Grand Tour,” a ritual experience of continental travel for wealthy British and American young men and, later, middle-class women and families, detailing the experience of European travel for a young Native woman. (Silko has stated in interviews that Hattie’s character was inspired by the life of Margaret Fuller, an American Transcendentalist who moved to Italy during the Risorgimento, married an Italian, and died abroad, and I will draw out the significance of this link.) But I will focus my analysis on how Silko’s novel assimilates transatlanticism to Native ways of knowing: in particular, the novel uses the motif of the garden to forge a transatlantic, cosmopolitan, and-for Silko–feminine consciousness that is at once cultural and ecological. Gardening and plants are central motifs in the novel, a way for Silko to engage

*Speaker

the interlinks between landscape production (what Derek Walcott writing of the Caribbean calls "colonized vegetation"), biopiracy, and empire, and to elaborate the novel's powerfully feminist, eco-poetical message. When visiting gardens in England and Italy, Indigo and Hattie discover archaeological traces of a pre-Christian, pagan spiritual past that is mother-and-nature-centered—"old stones" and carvings from the Celtic past before the "invasion of the Romans" in Bath, and in Lucca stones, pottery, and "female fertility figures" from the "old European cultures"—a sacralization of female reproductivity and sexuality that Indigo links to Native American beliefs and practices. During visits to European cities while on book tour, Silko was struck by the resilience of paganism and the links between what her novel calls "indigenous Europeans" and native Americans. "As hard as Christianity tried to wipe it out, and tried to break the connection between Europeans and the earth, and the plants and animals—even though they've been broken from it longer than the indigenous people of the Americas or Africa—that connection won't break completely." This circuit of feminine indigeneity is imaginatively recollected through Indigo's transatlantic travels. Visiting gardens in England and Italy, Indigo frequently is reminded of her home in the "garden of the dunes," and she collects seeds as souvenirs, a pragmatic hobby grounded in her early training for survival and respect for the earth. Seeds become a significant, resonant metaphor in Silko's text. Seeds allow Indigo to reflect on the importance of transatlantic movement and migration in the history of humans as well as plant and animal life; they become a vehicle for what eco-critics call "planetary consciousness." As Indigo recognizes, seeds are "among the greatest travelers of all."