

**The Necessity of Lived Resistance: Reading Leslie Marmon Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes* in an era of rapid climate change**

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In its complex readings of a range of fictional gardens, gardeners, and gardening practices, Leslie Marmon Silko's 1999 novel *Gardens in the Dunes*<sup>1</sup> engages with and foregrounds Indigenous relationships with the Earth as powerful alternatives to the unsustainable and damaging ways that many Euro-American and European societies live today. Set at the close of the nineteenth century, *Gardens* focuses primarily on a single all-female Indigenous Sand Lizard family, the only group still using the traditional dune gardens. Told from the perspective of the young Sand Lizard child Indigo, the story follows Indigo and her older sibling Sister Salt once they are captured by Indian agents after their mother goes missing at a Ghost Dance in Needles Arizona, and their grandmother, Grandma Fleet, dies and is buried by her granddaughters at the old dune gardens. Declared 'orphans' by the state, the sisters are separated with Sister Salt sent to the Parker Reservation on the Colorado River while Indigo is sent to Indian boarding school in California. The story then follows two separate strands: Sister Salt's life as a successful 'business entrepreneur' offering laundry services at the site of the construction of a new river dam; and Indigo's successful escape from Indian school, her temporary 'adoption' by the Euro-Americans Edward and Hattie Palmer, and her subsequent tour of the eastern United States then Europe. While both sisters battle to understand the socio-political situations and geographical locations in which they find themselves, both nonetheless show constant resistance as they aim constantly to return to the gardens in the dunes and to a future with one another guided by Sand Lizard cosmologies. In this context, Silko's depiction of Indigo and Sister Salt clearly shows how the sisters' ability to "remember the past and imagine futures" helps them - and Silko's readers - "to think critically about the present" (Streeby, 2018: 5).

As a counterpoint to the depictions of a series of ecologically damaging Euro-American ideologies and worldviews, *Gardens* foregrounds Indigenous Sand Lizard gardens and gardening practices as an articulation of alternative sustainable ways of being (and of seeing) for an extra-textual world informed by the realities of climate crisis. In this context, *Gardens* demonstrates the necessity of an everyday lived resistance to the dangerous and potentially fatal way that we are encouraged, perhaps even

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<sup>1</sup> Subsequently abbreviated as *Gardens*.

required, to live in patriarchal capitalist societies. And so we see how some of the novel's diverse gardens, gardeners, and gardening practices give us templates for more sustainable and cosmopolitical ways of living that, to cite the Mississauga Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, depend instead upon a "deep reciprocity" that emerges from "respect", "responsibility" and a recognition of the "relationship" between humans and the other-than-human world.<sup>2</sup> Reading Silko's novel from the perspective of Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge systems (TEK), we can engage with the Yellowknives Dene scholar Glen Sean Coulthard's assertion that Indigenous TEK practices are so "deeply informed by what the land as a system of reciprocal relations and obligations can teach us about living our lives in relation to one another and the natural world in nondominating and nonexploitative terms" that the term that Coulthard conceptualises to describe them is "grounded normativity" (2014: 13, original emphasis). Silko's novel very clearly juxtaposes a range of dominating and exploitative interactions with the natural world with a series of non-dominating and non-exploitative relationships. It is these non-dominating and non-exploitative relationships that point directly to an emphasis upon reciprocity and obligation, upon the "ethical engagements with the world and our relationships with human and nonhuman others", that is evident within the practice of grounded normativity as outlined by Coulthard (2014: 13).

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### **Sand Lizard Ethnobotanical Resistance**

In discussing Sand Lizard resistance, it is crucial to begin with an analysis of what exactly is being resisted. Silko herself has stated that *Gardens* "is about what capitalism makes people do to one another" (Arnold, 1998: 21), and the novel clearly traces some of the attitudes that encourage unsustainable and fatally harmful ways of living, while carefully showing what a more equal and caring society might look like. As the Potawatomi botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer has noted in her comparison of the Indigenous creation story of Skywoman with that of the Christian story of Eve, the resulting relationships of both figures to the other-than-human world demonstrate that "one story leads to the generous embrace of the natural world, [and] the other to [human] banishment" (2013: 7). Moreover, the Christian story is one embedded in notions of dominion, where man (and

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<sup>2</sup> Naomi Klein, "Dancing the World into Being: A Conversation with Idle No More's Leanne Simpson", *Yes* magazine, March 5 2013, <https://www.yesmagazine.org/peace-justice/dancing-the-world-into-being-a-conversation-with-idle-no-more-leanne-simpson>.

man only) is divinely gifted control over the rest of creation in order, quite literally, to 'subdue' it. As Kimmerer goes on to argue, "we are inevitably shaped by" the cultural stories that we tell and so, in predominantly Christian countries, our relationships to and with our environments can clearly be traced to those originary cultural stories of dominion, which in the subsequent narratives of patriarchy, imperialism, and capitalism soon become stories of domination (2013: 7). In *Gardens*, these fatally damaging, indeed deadly stories, are especially evident in the characters and actions of the Euro-American plant collector Edward Palmer and his 'society' sister Susan Palmer James, and more widely through a series of commercial botanical and mining ventures and business partnerships that Edward undertakes. Here, *Gardens* not only expands the individual and the domestic to demonstrate how it is connected to the wider processes and impacts of capitalism and proto-corporate enterprise, it also quite literally brings those bigger relationships *home*, allowing both its characters and its readers to see how man-made climate crisis is created, and how we all *as individuals* contribute to our changing climate. As Rob Nixon has so eloquently argued, climate crisis is a "slow violence" that "occurs gradually and out of sight," which is so "dispelled across time and space" that it is "typically not viewed as violence at all" (2011: 2); and this is true even when it is increasingly undeniable that our natural world is under violent assault. In short, because man-made climate crisis is difficult to see - because there are often no immediate or cataclysmic visible effects - it is also difficult to convince the general public of the need to mobilise and take action: to individually and collectively *resist*. *Gardens* directly addresses this problem of invisibility by exposing the relationships between the cultural stories that we tell, the dominating and exploitative individual human relationships with the earth, and the environmentally damaging practices and processes of global capitalism and the proto-corporate/corporate extractive industries.

I have analysed both Edward's and Susan's attitudes and actions in detail elsewhere (see Tillett, 2016), and so my focus here is on how, through the Sand Lizard gardens in the dunes, we are shown not only that a different kind of world is possible but also that we can - indeed, we *must* in the Anthropocene era - all participate in the necessity of a lived resistance to the kinds of harmful attitudes and relationships to the Earth that we have been persuaded to accept as 'natural'. In this context, it is crucial that we can clearly see that Sand Lizard traditional ecological knowledge informs Indigo and Sister Salt's everyday lived resistance to the deadly cultural stories around them. Silko's fictional Sand Lizards are, as

Adamson notes, based "on an actual band of the Tohono O'odham people known as the Hia C-ed O'odham or Sand People" who were forced out of their traditional desert lands by the drought caused by the damming and re-routing of the local river in the 1920s (2012: 229). Known primarily as 'Sand Papago', the Hia C-ed O'odham were, from the earliest Spanish contact, portrayed in European records as "a marginal people on the verge of extinction" due "to their land's apparent lack of resources, namely, water", who subsisted on what the later American records identify as "the sand foods of Sonora" (Martínez, 2013: 132, 145). As Gary Paul Nabhan, Wendy Hodgson and Frances Fellows note, the scant historical written records present a "polarized stereotyping of the Sand Papago as either impoverished primitives or noble savages" (1989: 515). And these records, as Martínez comments, dismiss the Hia C-ed O'odham as having no real "agricultural tradition to speak of" with only "a single known site" where the Hia C-ed O'odham "grew corn, beans, and squash" (2013: 149). While Nabhan's own acclaimed 1985 study, *Gathering the Desert*, introduces more information about Hia C-ed O'odham foodstuffs and their harvesting and use, especially in his descriptions of the uses of 'sandfood', a plant 'parasite' (1985: 51-59) and of 'amaranth' (1985: 93-104), there is still little discussion of the connections between such ethnobotanical practices and Indigenous cosmological concepts. However, Nabhan does speculate that the historical record is poor in part due to differing cosmopolitical ideologies and worldviews, as the Hia C-ed O'odham are defined according to a profoundly Spanish viewpoint:

Poor. No gold to give to the conquistadores. No agriculture that an outsider can recognise as such. No permanent housing or fixed residences. No cuisine except that prepared from herpetological oddities and plant parasites (1985: 55).

It is in direct response to the brevity of these early written European/Euro-American records and to their misinterpretations of Indigenous cultural traditions that Silko carefully crafts the Sand Lizard gardens to present a very different and much more comprehensive 'record' of sustainable Indigenous gardening practices in the sand dunes; practices that both create and maintain a delicate ecological balance and demonstrate a profound cosmological and cosmopolitical understanding of the workings of the natural world and humanity's place within it. *Gardens'* Sand Lizards exemplify the kinds of traditional Hia C-ed O'odham gardening practices that rely on a 'sandfood' that, as Nabhan argues, "defies domestication" and so requires highly specialised knowledge to locate. Moreover, the very harvesting of these sandfoods is not simply essential to their

continuation, but also itself an expression of Indigenous understandings of the interconnection of all life: as Nabhan comments, "While gathering food, you have participated in a wild kind of mutualism," an ecological interaction between species to the benefit of all that occurs because the harvesting of sandfood sheds its seeds in exactly the right places for its own regeneration (1985: 55).

In her descriptions of Grandma Fleet's gardening practices, Silko demonstrates Sand Lizard cosmopolitics where the responsible and respectful way to behave is to ensure that all living things have enough to sustain them: "Sand Lizard warned her children to share: Don't be greedy" (1999: 17). Accordingly, Indigenous harvesting practices are carefully demonstrated to show their cosmopolitical origins and aims:

The first ripe fruit of each harvest belongs to the spirits of our beloved ancestors, who come to us as rain; the second ripe fruit should go to the birds and wild animals, in gratitude for their restraint in sparing the seeds and sprouts earlier in the season. Give the third ripe fruit to the bees, ants, mantises, and others who cared for the plants. A few choice pumpkins, squash, and bean plants were simply left in the sand beneath the mother plants to shrivel dry and return to the earth...Old Sand Lizard insisted her garden was reseeded in that way because human beings are undependable; they might forget to plant at the right time or they might not be alive next year. (1999: 17)

Here, the Sand Lizard community is shown to be much wider than its human component; there is clear recognition of the role of many multi-species gardeners both living and dead, including ancestors, birds, animals, insects, and the earth itself. Importantly, all are required to work together to produce a successful harvest, and all are therefore entitled to share in the wealth of that harvest: no one group is privileged over any other. As I have argued elsewhere, Silko's description here shows a recognition of "the contribution of this wider community to the continuance of human life", as Sand Lizard emphasizes "the fragility and impermanence of human life" that is 'undependable', and also "expresses Indigenous understandings of the complex interdependencies between human and non-human life that are endangered by the short-term thinking, aggressive acquisition, and exclusive appropriation characteristic of capitalism" (2017: 235). Sand Lizard's teaching here is thus both spiritual and ecological: her demand for sharing recognises the

unbreakable links between physical and non-physical worlds; and her emphasis upon the equal value of all lives illustrates that any ecological threat to the sand gardens is also a threat to all life, including human life. It is her profound understanding of the interrelationship of all life that leads Grandma Fleet to remind Indigo and Sister Salt of the cycle of life, commenting that after death "[s]ome hungry animal will eat what's left of you and off you'll go again, alive as ever, now part of the creature who ate you" (1999: 53). In turn, her granddaughters' embracing of Sand Lizard cosmologies encourages them to bury Grandma Fleet "under her little apricot trees" in the understanding that her physical body will nourish the plants as it is supposed to do so (1999: 54).

Silko's fictional descriptions of the sand gardens actively refute the poverty of the factual historical record. Although Indigo is too young to remember the dune gardens, she nonetheless imagines them from the stories she has been told: "tall corn plants swaying gracefully in the breeze, surrounded with bushes of bean pods and black-eyed peas, their golden-green tendrils tangled around the thick pumpkin vines" (1999: 36-37). Moreover, the descriptions of the gardens trace the complexity and fragility of a desert ecosystem based on carefully maintained balances, where Sand Lizard traditional ecological knowledge can utilise the "precious moisture from the runoff" in the sandstone cliffs that is held by the "deep sand" (1999: 16). Indigo is taught that every human member of the Sand Lizard community has a responsibility to the plants allocated to them, "Every person had plants to care for" and took care of their plants "as if...[they] were babies" (1999: 18, 16). Moreover, Indigo understands that plants have senses and are responsive to human emotions, "'The plants listen...Don't argue or fight around the plants - hard feelings cause the plants to wither" (1999: 16). Above all, Indigo is taught to treat plants "respectfully" (1999: 16). As she approaches the end of her physical human life, Grandma Fleet's focus turns to passing on key Sand Lizard ethnobotanical knowledge: "where to plant the beans, corn, and squash seed, and how deep", how to avoid the full heat of the desert day by working "all night", how to supplement their diet by hunting, how to "raid the stores of seeds and mesquite beans" collected by the pack rats, how to preserve foods for the winter (1999: 47, 49, 52). The bountiful nature of past harvests in the dune gardens is evident in Grandma Fleet's descriptions of the "terraces where sweet black corn, muskmelons, and speckled beans used to grow", and the future potential of the dune gardens can be detected in the "wild gourds, sunflowers, and datura [that] seeded themselves wherever they found moisture" (1999: 49).

Significantly, the dune gardens are shown to provide traditional Indigenous 'sandfoods' even during times of shortage: "Amaranth grew profusely...When there was nothing else to eat, there was amaranth" and Sister Salt shows Indigo how to prepare the amaranth in two distinct harvests: boiling up "amaranth greens just like Grandma Fleet taught her" and, once "the amaranth went to seed", grinding a flour to make "tortillas" (1999: 16). Silko's incorporation of the amaranth here is quite deliberate: as Adamson has argued, amaranth "connects" Indigo "to the Aztecs" and so also to "the [colonial] politics that suppressed knowledge of this once important staple crop" (2011: 218). Described by Nabhan as "the meat of the poor people", amaranths are significant for not only "combining water and energy use efficiently" in ways that are crucial to a desert region, but also for their nutritional value: compared to 100 grams of lettuce, raw amaranth greens "contain nearly three times as many calories...eighteen times the amount of vitamin A...twenty times the amount of calcium...and almost seven times the amount of iron" leading Nabhan to describe the amaranth as "worth their weight in nutrition" and a key component of a traditional Hia C-ed O'odham diet (1985: 96, 97, 98). Indeed, the significance of amaranth for the Sand Lizards traces and exposes complex and violent histories of colonial settlement by both Europeans and Euro-Americans: as Adamson argues, it is these histories that show "the devastation that results when a food central to a culture's health and well-being is [deliberately] eliminated" by the colonisers (2011: 218).

Equally exposed, however, are the ongoing impacts of settler-colonialism as early in the novel the sand gardens are devastated by "starving" Indigenous peoples who are "fleeing the Indian police and soldiers sent by the government" attempting to impose the new reservation system (1999: 19). *Gardens* describes the arrival of these people in political terms as "refugees", and then in terms of a natural disaster that emphasises the profound impact of settler-colonial policies on Indigenous lives: "It was as if a great storm has erupted far in the distance, unseen and unheard by them at the old gardens" as people arrive as "a trickle, then a stream, and finally a flood" (1999: 20, 19). Here, the interconnections between humans, their environments, and all forms of life, are made clear, as the Indigenous peoples are forced by their hunger to reject and discard their Sand Lizard cosmopolitical teachings as "they ate everything they could find" including the "first harvest offerings" and the "seeds set aside for planting next season" (1999: 20). Here, we can see a clear illustration of the Potawatomi scholar Kyle Powys Whyte's analysis of how the profound cultural and natural dislocations caused by

settler-colonialism resonate with those currently being caused by rapid climate change, such as "ecosystem collapse, species loss, economic crash, drastic relocation, and cultural disintegration" (2018: 226). Moreover, settler colonialism has always "inflict[ed] anthropogenic environmental change on Indigenous peoples", and Whyte argues that "indigenous perspectives on how to respond to anthropogenic climate destabilization" are, significantly, "based on having *already lived through* local losses of species and ecosystems" (2017: 208, 207, 213, emphasis added). There is, Whyte argues, an active questioning of the narrative of 'finality' by Indigenous groups who have "already...endured one or *many more* apocalypses" (2018: 236, original emphasis), and this is crucial to the lived resistance of Silko's novel.

At this point of ecological destruction, the Sand Lizards are for the first time forced to leave the dune gardens - and so their own traditional ways of life - as a direct result of settler-colonial policies. But, importantly, it is in the local Euro-American town of Needles that the Sand Lizards' ethnobotanical resistance extends its scope, collecting and reintroducing plants formerly in the dune gardens alongside the introduction of new plants to ensure the continuation of Sand Lizard cosmopolitical and horticultural traditions. It is, significantly, at the "town dump" that Grandma Fleet repurposes the "refuse" of others to "retrieve [the] valuables the townspeople carelessly threw away" (1999: 24). Here, Grandma Fleet "saved seeds discarded from vegetables and fruits to plant at the old gardens when they returned", including the "apricot pits" by which she will successfully reintroduce "the apricot trees of her childhood" to the dune gardens (1999: 24). It is this looking outward and its strengthening effects upon Sand Lizard ethnobotanical traditions that is explored throughout the rest of the novel: first with the reintroduction of Grandma Fleet's apricot trees to the dune gardens; then later as Indigo travels first to California and New England, and then to England and Italy, discovering how far seeds have travelled and how they have been collected and traded, before bringing new seeds home to populate the dune gardens. In its juxtaposition of the theft of horticultural specimens by Edward and the ways in which those specimens are subsequently jealously guarded for profit with Sand Lizard practices of the sharing of seeds freely, *Gardens* "interrogates the ethics of plant breeding, hybridization, and biotechnologies that enrich colonizing nations and corporations" (Adamson, 2011: 218). *Gardens* also encourages its readers to consider the development of those imperial horticultural practices into the profit-driven multinational agribusinesses we see today, where powerful multinationals have the right to genetically modify

and patent seeds, disrupting the ways in which seeds naturally cross-fertilise and so impacting upon ecosystems on a global scale. This modern practice is doubly problematic: it not only imposes a requirement that all farmers purchase patented seeds, and even pay compensation if their own Indigenous seeds become cross-pollinated; but it also fails to recognise or acknowledge the complex and ancient Indigenous ethnobotanical traditions that can be traced in Grandma Fleet's careful seed collection: a practice that Adamson identifies as a "time-tested agro-ecological metho[d]...of innovation, the basis of which is free exchange, hybridization, and domestication in order to increase botanical biodiversity" (2017: 22). The Sand Lizard gardens thus present a picture of highly successful Indigenous ethnobotanical resistance to federal attempts to impose assimilation upon sovereign Indigenous groups. And, in this context, the assimilation demanded of the Sand Lizards is successfully subverted, as Becca Gerken notes, as useful "western practices" are "adopt[ed]" and incorporated rather than "Sand Lizard traditions" being "abandon[ed]" (2016: 182).

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#### **Widening the Resistance: Europe and Euro-America**

Importantly, Indigo's collection of seeds in accordance with Indigenous ecological traditions is not the only form of lived resistance, and it is significant that Silko widens her analysis of resistance in *Gardens* to look at forms of European and Euro-American gardens and gardeners who embrace more respectful and responsible alternative behaviours that resonate with the Sand Lizard cosmopolitical values. Through the figures of Hattie's Aunt Bronwen in Bath, England Aunt Bronwen's friend, the Italian *professoressa* Laura, *Gardens* thus shows us a range of European and Euro-American individuals and individual stories that hold the power to create and re-create the world through compelling counter-narratives of sustainable and sustaining lived resistance that recognises the profound and undeniable relationship between humans and other-than-human worlds. Via *Gardens'* depiction of a range of domestic gardens, it becomes clear that acts of collective resistance must begin with the individual, and that individual resistance must begin at home: resistance derives directly from the ways we choose to live our lives, it is a *lived* resistance. Consequently, my focus here is upon Silko's sustaining and sustainable European and Euro-American stories that act to extend and widen the ecological and cosmopolitical resistance of the novel.

Through its depiction of a range of ways of living *with* rather than simply *upon* the land, *Gardens* shows us that, if we are able to change our

damaging attitudes to the earth and put those changes into practice as part of our everyday lived experience, then we can all participate in and contribute to a necessary 'lived resistance' to the growing risks of ecological disaster. Crucially, this lived resistance applies not just to Silko's textual world, but also offers suggestions for continued human existence within our own increasingly ecologically precarious extra-textual worlds: in 2020, the notion of *individual* resistance to climate crisis is crucial. *Gardens* thus widens the ecological and cosmopolitical resistance of the text to include sustaining and sustainable European and Euro-American stories via the gardens and gardening practices of Aunt Bronwyn and the *professoressa* Laura. Reading Silko's novel as a narrative of lived resistance explores how we might understand those fictional European and Euro-American gardens in the context of the increasingly pressing need for all humans to take urgent international action over climate. And so the gardens of Aunt Bronwyn and Laura serve as timely reminders of long forgotten pre-Christian and pre-capitalist European traditions to which we should pay closer attention. Silko presents the gardens of Aunt Bronwyn and Laura as spaces in which interrelationships between human and other-than-human beings can be relearned, and which influence and encourage more human stories and acts of resistance. As Kimmerer has suggested, if we want to restore "the relationship between land and people", then we need to "'plant a garden'" because "it's good for the health of the earth and it's good for the health of people. A garden is a nursery for nurturing connection, the soil for cultivation of practical reverence" (2013: 126-127). Moreover, "once you develop a relationship with a little patch of earth, it becomes a seed itself" (Kimmerer, 2013: 127). Alongside the Sand Lizard gardens in the dunes, these additional gardens can be read not only as sowing seeds of individual resistance but also, through their abilities to nurture connections and kinship, as restorative in every way.

The European gardens of Silko's text demonstrate ancient and all-but-forgotten pre-Christian and pre-Capitalist English and Italian traditional ways of being in the world that, much like the Sand Lizard gardens in the dunes, are *lived* experiences that position themselves outside of and in opposition to the death cultures that surround them. Hattie's Aunt Bronwyn therefore engages in daily lived resistance, both refusing and refuting the deadly stories of the patriarchal capitalist world around her. In this context, it is notable that those characters who do succeed in telling new cultural stories are female, and so less invested in the patriarchal narratives of capitalism. The stories of Aunt Bronwen and the Italian *professoressa* Laura thus point to the ways that Simpson has asserted that

we can understand "land as pedagogy", where our lived experiences act to "generat[e] and regenerat[e] continually through [an] embodied practice" that is both "contextual and relational" (2014: 7). Aunt Bronwyn's concerns are thus not only with and for the gardens that she works and tends and her relationships with the other-than-human beings who reside with her, but also with the wider local environment: with the ancient trees and stones that have always been a part of the complex spiritual interactions between human and other-than-human beings in her local ecosystem. Aunt Bronwyn therefore openly decries the 'development' of Bath which has led to the felling of "stands of ancient oaks...preserved since the time of the Celtic kings", that has resulted in "wide scars" being carved into "the bellies of the hills" in order to clear the way for "more mansions of gigantic proportions" for "business tycoons from London and Bristol" (1999: 237). Moreover, Aunt Bronwyn is highly active in the preservation of the "ancient hill forts and stone circles" that are also threatened by urban development, openly expressing her concern that, unlike in the past when the local inhabitants of the land had a profound symbiotic relationship with the stones, in an era marked by the loss of common lands "people nowadays cared nothing" (1999:237).

Aunt Bronwyn's home - a Norman cloister formerly inhabited by nuns - is a profoundly female space where the distinctions traditionally made in patriarchal capitalist societies between human and other-than-human simply do not exist. Accordingly, Aunt Bronwyn not only shares her domestic space with 'livestock' and 'pets' who wander her home freely and are treated as family much to Edward's bewildered incomprehension, but also places her books "three feet above the floor" to accommodate the waters of the River Avon that regularly flood the dwelling (1999: 239). In her stewardship of a "stone garden", Aunt Bronwyn clearly continues the work of her grandfather, who has "rescued" many "fragments of old [standing] stones smashed to pieces" as reminders of Britain's non-Christian past "by order of the parish priest", and is himself buried unmarked "among the standing stones" in the garden, where the implication is that, in death, he continues to interact with these other-than-human beings as he had in life (1999: 252, 254). Importantly, Aunt Bronwyn tells the stories of the stones, and those stories not only "identif[y]" them as individual life forms but also narrate their lives: there are "broken stone with a double spiral carving to help plants grow faster", "the broken pieces of a stone destroyed by an angry mob of Christian converts", "praying stones and cursing stones", "stones that turned slowly in the sun to warm both sides of themselves, stones that travelled at night to drink from the river", and "stones that danced at high noon" or "in the light of the moon" (1999: 254). In many

ways, Aunt Bronwyn's varied gardens act to answer the questions posed by Matthew Wildcat, Mande McDonald, Stephanie Irlbacher-Fox and Glen Coulthard when they ask "what does it mean to think of the land as a source of knowledge and understanding? How do our relationships with the land inform and order the way humans conduct their relationships with each other and other-than-human beings?" (2014: ii). In this context, Aunt Bronwyn clearly cultivates what Simpson identifies as "an ecology of intimacy" in her gardens and gardening practices (2017: 8). Asserting that "if a garden wasn't loved, it could not properly grow," Aunt Bronwyn has painstakingly restored and recreated the convent gardens, complete with their original purposes (1999: 242). These purposes are both physical, to ensure the nuns had sufficient food and medical supplies; and spiritual, to promote an understanding of the relationships between culture and nature, and between human and other-than-human beings, through a proximity to the land. In Simpson's terms, Aunt Bronwyn "learn[s] both *from* the land and *with* the land" (2014: 7, original emphasis). In this sense, Aunt Bronwyn is the antithesis of Susan Palmer James, as her emphasis upon restoration not only rejects the deadly stories and politics of death worlds, but engages with and facilitates both sustainability and continuity.

Aunt Bronwyn states that it is her sincere belief that the plants in her gardens "have souls;" a concept that echoes and is echoed by her relationships with the other-than-human beings represented by the sacred groves and stones (1999: 242). Importantly, Aunt Bronwyn asserts that "if plants and trees has individual souls" then she is determined to "acquaint herself with as many different beings as possible" (1999: 244). Accordingly, her garden includes and offers space to plants from a multitude of different cultural and geographic locations, including "tomatoes, potatoes, pumpkins, squash, and sweet corn" from "the Americas" that grow alongside "garlic, onions, broad beans, asparagus, and chickpeas from Italy" and "peppers from Asia and Africa (1999: 242). While it is clear that these plants derive from the pursuit of British imperialism through horticultural collection - emphasised throughout the book by Edward's own horticultural expeditions and in this section of the text in particular by Silko's reference to Edward's clandestine 'employment' by the locus of British horticultural imperialism, the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew - Aunt Bronwyn's gardens are depicted as a form of lived resistance to the deadly stories of this imperial national narrative (1999; 241). And so, unlike Edward whose only interest is in the financial value of horticultural specimens and controlling the international markets for and profits from those specimens, Aunt Bronwyn by contrast recognises those

imperial stories in the designs of her gardens. These designs, which separate yet join plants from different geographical regions and climates, expose the horticultural histories of Britain: "the plants the Romans and Normans introduced" that demonstrate "how few [of the] food crops and flowers" now widely accepted as 'British' "were [actually] indigenous to England" (1999: 245). Like the Sand Lizard gardens in the dunes, Aunt Bronwyn's system of planting respects the ways in which plants "preferred to grow together to protect one another from insects" and so "flowers [grow] among the vegetables, with herbs and medicinal plants scattered among them" (1999: 247). In this way, we can read Aunt Bronwyn's gardens and her understandings of other-than-human beings and the relationships between living beings via Kimmerer's contention that sustainable ways of living and being involve those varied life forms "cooperating [and] not competing", the antithesis of both Edward's cultural worldview and his way of living (2013: 132). Accordingly, on Indigo's departure, Aunt Bronwyn gifts her with an abundance of seed packets that not only illustrates Indigo's own assertion that seeds are the 'greatest travellers' but, through Aunt Bronwyn's additional inclusion of advice on "best conditions and methods" for cultivation, also offers a blunt refusal of Edward's capitalist and materialist evaluation of plant beings (1999: 269). What we read in Aunt Bronwyn's gardens and gardening practices, therefore, is not only a lived resistance to the deadly stories of the patriarchal capitalist world, but also the kind of paradigm shift that is required for the telling of new cultural stories.

This paradigm-shift is equally evident in Aunt Bronwyn's "dear friend" Laura, the Italian academic and *professoressa* with whom Aunt Bronwyn shares a "mutual interes[t] in Old European artifacts and gardening", and together the two characters' physical and social locations can be read as a crucial part of their ability to successfully change their worldviews and ways of living and being in the world (1999: 283). Aunt Bronwyn thus not only refuses established cultural conventions to live alone as a widow in the socially and geographically isolated and emphatically female space of a former convent, but is also suspected by her niece Hattie of having "left the [Christian] church altogether!" (1999: 265). Laura also lives alone as she has been abandoned by her socially disgraced husband (he is an "army colonel" who has deserted on the eve of a major battle), but this socio-cultural isolation is compounded by her unusual pursuit of a career: she is "a scholar and collector of Old European artifacts" as well as a gardener (1999: 305, 287). Significantly, Laura is, to Hattie's surprise, "much younger than her aunt", and this realisation acts to emphasise how both the desire and the ability to change

worldviews in the text crosses generations (1999: 283). The gardens of Bath and Lucca are connected by the care and respect shown to other-than-human beings by both Aunt Bronwyn and Laura, yet Laura's gardens are also an Italianate original of the 'copy' that Susan Palmer James tried to create in Oyster Bay. Significantly recalling Susan's desire to make and remake, to subdue and impose her will upon the natural world around her, Hattie sees the gardens as a "primordial forest" and interprets them as an example of "what became of even the most elegant gardens over time" (1999: 290). Hattie's failure to recognise the gardens as gardens emerges from her inability to recognise these as the result of Laura working with the other-than-human beings that surround her; an illustration of what Kimmerer has called a "partnership" between human and other-than-human (2013: 126). Laura's gardens house her collections of pre-Christian European statues, and Laura's garden designs and her positioning of the statues echoes the emphasis within ancient European cultures upon the significance and centrality of an active relationship with the land. Laura's decision to leave "fallen trees... to nurture the earth for seedlings" thus illustrates her respect for and deep engagement with the existing local ecosystem which overrides any desire to follow horticultural 'fashions' like Susan, or to impose her will on the land like Edward (1999: 291). Laura's gardening practices therefore demonstrate her understanding that "plants answer questions by the ways they live" and that the role of human beings is to "liste[n] and translat[e] the knowledge of other beings": in other words, Laura knows that "paying attention is a form of reciprocity" (Kimmerer, 2013: 158, 222).

Perhaps the most powerful story of sustainability concerns Laura's collection of sacred ancient artefacts. Here, Edward's museological mentality and his desire to 'preserve' out of cultural context is scandalised by Laura's decision to place the stone statues in "fresh air and sunshine" rather than let them suffer "burial in a museum" (1999: 296). Edward's outrage is, tellingly, demonstrated via the established routes by which patriarchal authority asserts itself: Laura is decried as "an affront to science and scholarship" for exposing the ancient statue collection to the elements, her gardens are derided as an example of "what happened when irreplaceable scientific data fell into the wrong hands", and her collection is 'claimed' as rightly belonging "in the hands of scientists and scholars" and certainly not in the hands of a "frivolous woman" (1999: 295, 296, 295, 296). However, Laura's desire to house the stones outside not only refuses the deathly stories of cultural stasis told by museums, but also attempts to re-imagine their original locations as a means by which to also reimagine their original sacred and ceremonial meanings and purposes. In other words, via a careful

positioning of the stones, Laura attempts to create and maintain a dialogue with other-than-human beings. Edward's patriarchal ire seems to be equally provoked by the abundance of stone fertility goddesses that populate Laura's gardens, which he finds "far more monstrous than the centaur or minotaur" he has already seen: the intricately carved "human vulva;" the abundance of snake figures that resonate with the Old Snake guardian at the Sand Lizard dune gardens; and the "rain garden" of aloe, shells and sand that is full of figures of hybrid human and other-than-human nursing mothers whose presence exposes the interconnections of all living beings through the equation of equally essential and nurturing "raindrops and drops of breast milk" (1999: 299, 292, 303). While Edward is disturbed and horrified by the human-animal hybrids that point to a world beyond his understanding as structured by Cartesian order and Linnaean classification, Indigo is reassured and comforted as she makes crucial connections to Grandma Fleet's practice of "talk[ing] to the big snake" in the Sand Lizard gardens as she and Laura "exchang[e] snake stories" (1999: 299, 301).

While both Aunt Bronwyn and Laura successfully resist the deadly stories of the patriarchal capitalist world by telling new cultural stories, it is notable that both also resist patriarchal capitalism's deadly ways of living. In direct contrast to the ways in which Edward's individual way of living and being in the world reflects powerful and damaging global imperial processes through his desire to own and profit from the horticultural specimens he 'collects', both Aunt Bronwyn and Laura engage in the kinds of exchange and knowledge transfer practiced by Grandma Fleet. Grandma Fleet's storage of "seeds discarded from vegetables and fruits" in "little glass jars", and her careful "instructions" to Sister Salt and Indigo regarding the specific care required by each plant being is mirrored by the wax seed packets and written notes of care given to Indigo by Aunt Bronwyn and Laura (1999: 24, 37). Crucially, here Silko's readers are forced to re-evaluate Indigo's gleeful statement that "seeds must be among the greatest travellers of all!" (1999: 293). While, ostensibly, this seems to point to the imperial horticultural project, in the context of Grandma Fleet, Aunt Bronwyn and Laura, it seems also to illustrate not only the reciprocity of the relationships between human and other-than-human beings, but also the *agency* of other-than-human beings. In this context, the exchanges and reciprocal interactions of the text do not evade or ignore the imbalances of power between human and other-than-human beings, but rather subvert, invert, and transform them through an emphasis upon Indigenous Sand Lizard philosophies; upon the lived resistance of sustainable stories founded within the tenets of grounded normativity. In this way, both gardening (the local) and

horticulture (the global) within the text are transformed from an explicitly imperialist endeavour into a means of exchange, dialogue, and reciprocity.

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### **Lived Resistance: Creating Sustaining and Sustainable Stories**

Reading Silko's *Gardens* as a narrative of lived resistance requires us to consider the ways that the text depicts the role of humans in the creation of ecological damage, both overt and covert. It requires us to see the ways in which the *global* - actions of nation states, the practices of industries (and later multi-national corporations), and the ideological drivers of imperialism, capitalism and patriarchy - are directly related to and inseparable from the *local* - the ways in which we, as individuals and communities, live our lives. Silko's novel also presents a way of understanding the global 'natural world' via the local garden; where the textual gardens are depicted as places where "a moral universe is mapped" (Klindienst, 2007: xx). In order to fully understand our own roles in taking the kinds of unprecedented paradigm-changing action required to avert climate disaster, we need to be able to connect these dots; to embrace the UN IPCC climate report of 2018 and to accept, as Klein has argued, not only that "we need to think... radically differently", but also that "a very different worldview can be our salvation" (2014: 23, 60). Crucially, those of us located within non-Indigenous societies and worldviews need to remember that "we never lost our connections with nature...A great many of us just forgot about them for a while" (Klein, 2014: 446). Importantly, Silko's text shows us how we can begin to remember, by tracing those elided histories and relationships, and by foregrounding more sustainable and respectful ways of living and being in the world.

In allowing us to "think critically about the present", Silko's novel can therefore be very profitably read as a narrative of lived resistance (Streeby, 2018: 5). Indeed, Silko has openly declared that "*Gardens in the Dunes* really is about *now*... it's offering people another way to see things and possible ways to connect up, in a spiritual way, to withstand" (Arnold, 1998: 21-22, emphasis added). Moreover, by showing us how "wisdom is generated from the ground up", *Gardens* can be read as a narrative of lived resistance that has a very specific Indigenous focus (Simpson, 2014: 8). In this context, we can certainly read *Gardens* as a demonstration of "grounded normativity"; of how a system of "reciprocal relations and obligations" might work in "non-dominating and non-exploitative terms" not just among the Indigenous communities of the text, but also among non-Indigenous communities (Coulthard, 2014: 13). Indeed, *Gardens* begins to ask

a similar question to that posed by Wildcat, McDonald, Irlbacher-Fox and Coulthard: "what does it mean to understand land - as a system of reciprocal social relations and ethical practices - as a framework for decolonial critique?" (2014: ii). And *Gardens* also begins to provide some solutions to Kimmerer's question regarding "How, in our modern world, can we find our way to understand the earth as a gift again, to make our relations with the world sacred again?" (2013: 31).

Above all, reading *Gardens* as a narrative of lived resistance allows us to move beyond what Kimmerer has identified as a "breeding [of] despair" in the current deadly cultural stories of climate crisis that "robs us of agency" by enforcing "paralysis" (2013: 327, 328). If Silko's stories of Edward and Susan tell us anything about the naturalisation of dominant patriarchal capitalist relationships with the natural world and its human and other-than-human inhabitants, they tell us that a different kind of world is necessary. In this context, Kimmerer has argued that the story of the capitalist market is "just a story" and "we are free to tell another," even "to reclaim the old [Indigenous] one" (2013: 31). We need, as Klein has suggested, to accept that "core" western economic, religious and political "cultural narratives" are driving environmental destruction, we need to "unlearn the myth that we are the masters of nature", and we need to effect "a shift in worldview" from "domination and depletion" to "regeneration and renewal" (2014: 41, 395, 424). In short, Silko's narrative of lived resistance tells us that we need to reject the unsustainable - the established narratives of domination and exploitation - and embrace and enact the sustainable: the Indigenous tenets of grounded normativity. In this context, Mascha Gemein has argued that Silko's *Gardens* acts specifically to "explai[n] Indigenous perspectives...for the sake of a cosmopolitical paradigm change" (2016: 491). For Gemein, therefore, *Gardens* showcases a series of "changed concepts and practices that [can] lead to a more successful communication, one that negotiates multicultural and multispecies experiences" (2016: 486). The Cree/Métis botanist Mary Siisip Geniusz has commented that "reality is not concrete. It is fluid. And that fluidity is influenced by personal actions...What we do, even what we think, changes what happens. It changes reality for everyone" (2015: 17). In the narratives of lived resistance in Silko's novel, we can see that "it is not the land that has been broken, but our relationship to it"; that, if we can "restore the land... the land restores us" (Kimmerer, 2013: 336). In its emphasis upon an interspecies resistance that travels, connects, and exchanges, *Gardens* thus begins to sow what Kimmerer has identified as "the precious seeds for...[an essential] change of worldview" (2013: 369).

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