"Mute Endurance": Precarious Planting and Affective Ecologies in Native American Novels

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Soil and Oil

This paper attempts to shed some light on the subtle entanglement between the use of sexual violence against Indigenous women and the extractive violence used against the land. The connection between land theft-cum-soil abuse and cross-cultural sexual relations is the topic of a set of novels by Linda Hogan (*Mean Spirit*, 1990), Louise Erdrich (*Tracks*, 1988 and its sequel, *Four Souls*, 2004), and Diane Wilson (*The Seed Keeper*, 2021). My discussion of these texts' representations of 'affective extractivism' is coupled with a glimpse at these novels' representation of quite another kind of intimacy—that between plant cultivators and their plants, seeds, and the soil. The counterhegemonic, ecofeminist discourse of *non*-extractive intimacies—encapsulated in the role of Indigenous women gardeners—shows these literary women not only as pawns in appropriative land deals but also as keepers of plant knowledge and agents of food security. I suggest that the reality behind the semantics of feminizing the land in colonial discourse rests on the tacit knowledge that women possessed a more intimate familiarity with the complex organic entanglements between plants and soils than extractive colonial agriculture would ever achieve (Merchant 17–19). The long history of women's work with seeds and plants, it seems, remains as yet largely unwritten with regard to what is today the United States.

This volume focuses in large part on the 'affective' aspects of fossil and nuclear forms of extraction—an important topic, given the need to phase out of these energy sources as quickly as possible. Yet there are also organic entities that became subject to violent extractive practices: The focus here will be on soil and seeds, which have been manipulated by an increasingly extractive and omnivorous form of agriculture, purportedly with the purpose of feeding a grow-

ing world population.[1] The novels in discussion suggest a critical attitude to this practice.

The Domesticity of Colonial Extraction

In *Mean Spirit*, Linda Hogan fictionalizes the historical case of the Osage murders, an uninvestigated spree of killings of members of the Osage tribe on whose lands oil had been discovered in 1920s Oklahoma. The novel addresses the nexus between the systematic legal dispossession of Native Americans during the Allotment era, itself shown as a continuation of the Indian Removal of the 1830s, and the beginnings of the oil industry. Non-Indian settlers made and still make strategic use of sexual relations—in addition to murder and intimidation—to bring themselves into the possession of land formerly considered useless for farming but now strongly desired for its resource wealth. The novel shows the micropolitics of land transactions conducted in the shadow of the General Allotment Act (1887), which transformed commonly held reservation lands into private allotments, threatening to evict and dispossess Indigenous title holders who did not comply with the requirement of practicing European-style agriculture on their land (Justice/O'Brien). The novel's central focalizer, respected Osage woman Belle Graycloud, is apprehensive of the danger of sharing the fate of a murdered cousin, Grace Blanket, who became wealthy through oil. Grace had inadvertently picked a piece of "barren" land inadequate for farming. "With good humor, she named her property 'The Barren Land.' Later, after oil was found there, she called it 'The Baron Land,' for the oil moguls" (Hogan 8). Her daughter Nola, who had witnessed the persecution and murder of her mother by two men in a black Buick, is adopted by Belle to protect her from sharing her mother's fate. Meanwhile, Belle gets under a more and more dangerous siege herself after oil is discovered in her garden. All kinds of legal tricks and violent intimidation are used by white settlers to deprive the Osage of their valuable land. Marriage is one of these

1 Obviously, deforestation, especially in the pre-coal age, is another example of extraction, the romanticization of trees in song and poetry its sentimental counterpart. Other examples are the quasi-extinction of beaver and other animals by the fur trade, the sperm whale for candle wax, and the bison for factory leather (and taking away subsistence food from Plains tribes). These ecocidal activities, I suggest, also belong to the larger complex of 'affective extractivism.'

tricks, resulting in an atmosphere of suspicion in cross-cultural relationships. In search of protection, Nola ends up marrying a seemingly unsuspicious white man but feels ambivalent about him. She makes the mistake of asking him to look over her finances:

> She wanted to see what she could spare for her friends so that they would not be forced to lease more of their land. But the news he brought back was that his father had squandered much of her money investing in companies that were now going broke. And her old fears returned to her and she again suspected her young husband. She believed he would murder her one day. Not while she was pregnant. The child was her safeguard, but later, or maybe he would wait for another child as others had done. (Hogan 263)

Both out of fear and being caged in by her marriage, Nola ends up killing her husband.

Hogan articulates a common settler colonial practice: territorial appropriation through marriage.[2] This plot line is paralleled by that of Belle herself, whose cornfield is constantly visited by unseen disturbances: Holes are dug in her garden at night; the white neighbor's fence mysteriously moves closer and closer onto her land; her beehives are disturbed by her neighbor's cattle. Finally, her house burns down of an unknown cause, and she has to join her ancestors' example in leaving her home and garden.

Mean Spirit is a particularly good example of how Native American literary works explore the kinship 'economy' of "tense and tender ties" between colonialism's exploitative attitude toward the land and the role of human, especially sexual, intimacy within the colonial extractive dispositif. "Tense and tender ties" is Ann Laura Stoler's metaphor for the sociopolitical and discursive entanglement of asymmetrical colonial and conjugal relations of power—including the articulation and enactment of colonial abuse through physical abuse. Inspired by the work of Sylvia Van Kirk, Stoler discusses the ways in which the macropolitical "regimes of truth" (Foucault) are enacted on the "microsites" of imperial governance (Stoler 24). The regime of truth considered in this essay is the colonial structure of resource exploitation of oil and soil in the United States. Conducted on Indigenous land, this extractive practice was rational-

2 Louise Erdrich also addresses the topic of territorially invasive intimacies, without reference to extractive resources, in her novel *The Round House* (2012).

ized and legitimized by a network of legal and domestic constructions of human relationships, many of them enacted on the bodies of Indigenous women.

Wastelanding

Recent critical reflection on the cultural consequences of the extraction economy focuses on the fossil and nuclear energy cycles.[3] In *The Birth of Energy*, Cara Daggett explores the formation of "petro-subjectivities" and "petro-humanities" in conjunction with the burgeoning fossil fuel-based economy. She traces the discourse of "energy" and thermodynamics throughout the Anglophone literature of the industrial age. In *Living Oil*, Stephanie LeMenager discusses the aesthetics of petroleum in American literature. Her reading of Upton Sinclair's novel *Oil!* (1927), an early critique of petromodernity, reinforces Rob Nixon's discussion of that novel as an example of "slow violence"—the gradual and almost invisible encroachment of the violent effects of ecocidal practices on the lives of people. In mixing the petroleum plot with the emergence of Hollywood culture and international socialism, Sinclair draws a global picture of the massive changes brought about by the fossil age, which deprives some people of their farmland while enabling the more privileged Hollywood society to go love cruising in fancy cars along the California coast. In its critical representation of the entanglement of these various economic and cultural forces, the novel stands as a fine example of literary dialectics.

In *Wastelanding*, her account of the destruction of Diné land by the uranium industry, Traci Voyles carves out the ideological subtexts of the connection between resource extraction and the cultural characterization of the land to be exploited. She explains that the very meaning of "Navajo" emerged from a semantic shift in relation to the land the tribe inhabits. While "navahu" in the language of the Tewa-speaking Pueblo tribes meant "large areas of cultivated fields," the meaning subsequently degenerated into the Spanish-derived

3 For a magisterial treatment of the emergence and representation of the fossil fuel industry see Malm. Among many other insights into the workings of fossil capital, Malm reminds us that both the fossil industry and the Anthropocene, which it fuels, are neither the work of nature nor of the human species (as some theorists of the Anthropocene suggest) but the work of a tiny "clique" of white and originally British men who "employed steam power as a literal weapon against the best part of humankind" (Malm 267).

"a large, more or less worthless, flat piece of land" (Voyles xi). "The social construction of the high, arid landscapes of the Southwest as 'more or less worthless'," Voyles writes,

> has been a fundamental component of colonization of the Diné, as well as other southwestern and Great Basin tribes. In fact, the inhabitation of dry, arid landscapes by native nations was used as evidence of their low status on the Western hierarchy of civilization, following a kind of environmental determinism that posited that "barren" landscapes supported villainous and savage peoples. (xi-xii)

The semantic transition from "fertile" to "barren," with the latter's association of wickedness (xii), confirms my overall impression that Indigenous agricultural practices and plant knowledges were and still are systematically effaced—not least because these practices and knowledges lay primarily in the hands of women.

At the beginning of her book, Voyles describes the wanton destruction of over four thousand fruit-bearing peach trees and more than eleven acres of corn and beans as part of a U.S. military operation in 1864. Diné peach trees and other food plants even continued to be destroyed after the tribal people had surrendered. Quoting historian Stephen Jett, Voyles wonders "what it was about these peach trees, corn stalks, and bean plants that invited such unnecessary violence, such 'systematic eradication' of fruits, grains, and legumes" (viii). Historian Peter Iverson's assumption that "perhaps the army simply wanted to remove evidence that contradicted the image of Navajos as full-time nomadic wanderers" seems convincing, as evidence for Indigenous agriculture has been removed alongside the tribes throughout American history (Voyles viii). While the removal of people has been a central topic of American studies discourse, from colonial discourse analysis to settler colonial studies, the historical and historiographical effacement of Indigenous agriculture has apparently hardly been tackled. Daniel Heath Justice and Jean O'Brien's recent edition *Allotment Stories* (2021), containing many examples of the effects of what Theodore Roosevelt called approvingly a "mighty pulverizing engine" (Voyles xiii), is a laudable exception to the rule. The invisibilization of Native American land tenure works in tandem with the effacement of the extractiveness and "slow violence" (Nixon) of settler agriculture, which is one of the most vicious motors of climate change and species extinction to this day.

Colonial Intimacies in North America

In her classic study *The Lay of the Land* (1975), Annette Kolodny documents the discursive feminization of the land in colonial texts, suggesting a connection between the subjugation of the land and its original inhabitants and the subjection of women. In particular, she refers to the "pastoral paradox" by which settler writers at once praised the 'feminine' beauty and desirability of the land while advocating its defloration by 'husbandry.' This contradictory set of desires, Kolodny writes, led to a tension within the discourse of the American pastoral, forcing an impossible extension of its semantic range, "from a healthy sense of intimacy and reciprocity to the most unbridled and seemingly gratuitous destruction" (27–28). In the patriarchal-colonial imagination, "mastery over the landscape" was gained "at the cost of emotional and psychological separation from it" (ibid.). The rhetoric of rape and ravishment, found in numerous descriptions of the unknown land, had its practical equivalent in an exhaustive treatment of the soil: an issue that early American writers (like Jefferson) noted but did not problematize. After all, if a field was degraded due to overuse and/or under-fertilization, one could just move further west (Kolodny 29).

Within the colonial discursive formation, the metaphorical liaison between land theft and sexualized violence reaches from Sir Walter Raleigh's famous "maidenhead" passage[4] and the seizure of Pocahontas (romanticized into America's "Indian princess" in love with Captain John Smith) all the way to the scandalous disappearance and murder of Indigenous women in both the U.S. and Canada throughout the 20th and into the 21st century (Razack; Martin; "Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women"). Observers assert a correlation between the murder and disappearance of Indigenous women and near-by "man camps" inhabited by men working for fossil fuel extraction companies (Martin). Sexual violence and colonial resource extraction converge in this particularly appalling aspect of racial capitalist 'intimacy.' There is nothing sentimental about it. Raped and murdered women and stolen lands

4 "Guiana is a countrey that hath yet her maydenhead, never sackt, turned, nor wrought, the face of the earth hath not bene torne, nor the vertue and salt of the soyle spent by manurance, the graves have not bene opened for golde, the mines not broken with sledges, nor their Images puld downe out of their temples. It hath never bene entered by any armie of strength, and never conquered or possessed by any christian Prince" (Ralegh 428).

are realities which romantic sentimentalism struggles in vain to convert into comfortable stories.

As Carolyn Merchant and other ecofeminist scholars have shown, colonial land management frequently led to the degradation and erosion of soils. The modern rationalistic ideal of agriculture rests on the notion of intense farming with a limited amount of fallow periods during which the exhausted soil could regenerate. This is a departure from former medieval practices. In medieval times, when the distance that had to be covered to reach a community's fields exceeded the walking limit, new settlements were created (Merchant 104).[5] With the destruction of the commons by enclosure and the "imparking" of land beginning in the late Middle Ages (Way), these traditional land use practices receded. The Lockean ideal of enclosure was carried to America. John Winthrop explains the classic distinction between a "civilized" and a "non-civilized" relationship to the land: "The natives in New England, they inclose no land neither have any settled habitation nor any tame cattle to improve the land by, and so have no other but a natural right to those countries" (73). This natural right, which Winthrop associates with the common use of the land, had long been superseded in more developed countries (he claims) "by enclosing and peculiar manurance" which gave its practitioners a "civil right" (ibid.). Early settlers were perfectly aware of the land tenure practices there but regarded Indigenous land tenure, with its shifting planting sites and seasonal choice of accommodation, as nomadic "wandering" and "vagrancy," reducing the complex agricultural practice to a hunting economy (Mackenthun 165–73). As Carolyn Merchant and others suggest, this misreading of the evidence is related to the gender order in these diverse cultural groups. Control of the planting cycle lay in the hands of women; consequently, "'civilizing' the Indians meant converting their female-dominated shifting horticultural production into male-dominated settled farming. Despite the power of women in production, colonial fathers dealt only with Indian males" (Merchant 92). The colonial land-grab thus not only brought about a degradation of the soil but also led to the disempowerment of Indigenous women.

5 Native American agricultural societies acted similarly, moving their settlements according to the requirements of their fields (Trigger 133–34).

Deferred Garden

The paradox involved in the continuing "lay of the land"—its celebration as a pastoral ideal concurrent with its ongoing exhaustion not only by the obvious activities of mining, drilling, and fracking, but also by monoculture—has been addressed by American historians and writers for quite some time, such as Frank Norris in *Octopus* (1905) and John Steinbeck in *Grapes of Wrath* (1939). Chemical fertilization was added to organic manure after World War II all the while the Little House on the Prairie iconography continued undisturbed. While settler agriculture asserts to 'improve' the soil, it actually contributed to its degradation and depletion right from the start. In *Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck deploys and counters the American political myth of the search for a pastoral paradise by giving a historically precise analysis of the reasons for the economic dilemma of the New Deal period: For him, the cause of human and ecological misery is a fatal combination of a speculative finance industry and a misguided and ignorant agricultural policy, directly leading to the environmental catastrophe of the Dust Bowl.

In *Dust Bowls of Empire*, historian Hannah Holleman describes the Dust Bowl as a global environmental phenomenon, critiquing the historiographical consensus that regarded it as an exclusively natural catastrophe. This view, Holleman asserts, was made possible by scholars ignoring the larger economic and environmental context. The outcome of this ignorance is a Dust Bowl denialism that served the national (mythical) narrative of settler agriculture, counteracted the New Deal narrative of rationalistic reforms, and still serves the purposes of agricultural extractivism (Holleman 40–46). She identifies an ideological competition between the officially accepted version of the event based on an article written for NASA, which completely excludes consideration of the social factors leading to the catastrophe, and concurrent empirical scholarship that proved the relevance of those factors. Holleman shows how science-based interventions by soil experts calling for a reform of agricultural practices in the 1930s and earlier were systematically ignored (46). Soil erosion had been identified as a "world problem" by the 1930s and it was related to the expansion of cash crop agriculture (Holleman 47). Yet, published as recently as 2004, the NASA report flies in the face of both previous and more recent studies (e.g., Worster) and of a modern understanding of the entanglements of human and non-human factors in the production of climate-related events. Environmental historian Donald Worster identifies the cultural assumptions underlying both the economic mismanagement and settler colonial arrogance

responsible for the disaster: "The attitude of capitalism—industrial and pre-industrial—toward the earth was imperial and commercial; none of its ruling values taught environmental humility, reverence, or restraint" (Worster 97). Holleman goes one step further when she demands to regard the Dust Bowl as the manifestation of an ongoing extension of "white territorial control," ideologically inspired by white supremacism (45). It is this "'new imperialism' of the late 1800s and early 1900s, which violently transformed societies and the land, entrenching the ecological rift of capitalism on a global scale and the related patterns of unequal ecological exchange that persist to this day" (ibid. 47).

In his reading of *Grapes of Wrath* and speaking from an Indigenous perspective, novelist Louis Owens expresses his puzzlement about "the American phenomenon of destroying the Garden in the search for the Garden" (53). As we have seen with the instance of the destruction of the Diné peach trees, the search for the mythical garden—a crucial element in Jefferson's narrative of the agrarian republic—regularly coincided with the destruction of the gardens already in place. Owens identifies the search for the eternally deferred Promised Land as the ideological core of the problem leading to the 20th century's agro-ecological disasters: "There is no Promised Land and nowhere else to go […] The American myth of the Eden ever to the west is shattered, the dangers of the myth exposed" (Owens 55). The present commitment will have to be not to some elusive mythical space but "to making *this* place, *this America*, the garden it might be" and to arrive "at a new understanding of the place [the people] inhabit *here and now*" (ibid.; my emphasis).

Extractive and Affective Intimacies

Domestic micropolitics of exploitation and property transfer in conjunction with affective regimes are also addressed in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* and its sequel, *Four Souls*. Both novels center on the Anishinabe woman Fleur Pillager, an allotment landowner endowed with special powers, who, in *Tracks*, reciprocates her rape by non-Indian men and the clearcutting of her oak trees by causing deadly storms. In *Four Souls*, however, now displaced from her land, she enters into an intimate relation with the owner of the logging company, Mauser, sharing his home built from the stems of her beloved trees. Mauser goes bankrupt and disappears to the East, and with the help of their smart son, Fleur is able to retrieve her land in a poker game with the man who bought

up Mauser's forfeited property. She returns to her land, adopting her mother's name Four Souls.

In *Tracks* we learn that Fleur Pillager entertains a special relationship with natural forces, in particular the mythical lake creature Misshepeshu: "Men stayed clear of Fleur Pillager […] Even though she was good-looking, nobody dared to court her because it was clear that Misshepeshu, the water man, the monster, wanted her for himself" (Erdrich 1988, 11). The unreliable narrator of this passage, her enemy Pauline, claims that Fleur was messing with "half-forgotten medicine," that the tracks of her feet changed into the tracks of bear paws, and that her laugh resembled that of a bear (ibid., 12). Like Hogan's mysterious female landowner Nola, Medea-like Fleur is the object of male desire and fear, her defiance and solitary life in the forest a constant provocation in the eyes of settler society.

Novels like *Mean Spirit*, *Tracks*, and *Four Souls* link sexual intimacy and property theft. They also comment on the abuse of the land by colonial extractive economies like clearcutting, oil drilling, and cash crop agriculture. Hogan and Erdrich are less articulate about *Indigenous* forms of land tenure and their significant difference from colonial practices. Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999), in contrast, provides a particularly informative and poetic description of Indigenous women's stewardship of soil and food plants which amounts to a very different kind of intimacy from that of the "tender ties" forced upon female landowners within the colonial extractive social formation. Silko contrasts Indigenous agrarian practices with the scientifically guided plant management of colonial society—not just the tending of plants but also the art of seed selection, propagation, and breeding.[6] Before her death at the beginning of *Gardens*, the elder Grandmother Fleet instructs the protagonist Indigo and her sister, Salt, in the art of tending to the foodplants in the Sand Lizard tribe's dune gardens. She teaches them to grow corn, squash, beans, pumpkins, amaranth, cornflowers, and apricot trees in a way that stresses a companionship between the seedlings and the children:

> After the rains, they tended the plants that sprouted out of the deep sand; they each had plants they cared for as if the plants were babies. Grandma Fleet had taught them this too. The plants listen, she told them. Always

6 Steinbeck, in *Grapes of Wrath*, notes the gender displacement also evidenced in Europe: He characterizes plant breeding as an activity conducted by "men of understanding and knowledge and skill" (chapter 25).

> greet each plant respectfully. Don't argue or fight around the plants—hard feelings cause the plants to wither. (Silko 1999, 14)

The girls learn that the dune gardens had been initiated a long time ago by the tribe's ancestor Sand Lizard, a mythical female who also established cultural rituals in relation to the plants:

> 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 on the sand beneath the mother plants to shrivel dry and return to the earth. Next season, after the arrival of the rain, beans, squash, and pumpkins sprouted up between the dry stalks and leaves of the previous year. Old Sand Lizard insisted her gardens be 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. (Silko 1999, 15)

Grandmother Fleet is a gardener who passes on her ancient tribal knowledge to her grandchildren shortly before her death and the girls' absorption into colonial society. Her ritual giveaway of part of the harvest testifies to her respect for companion species. She knows how to coax the plants into flowering in the complex ecotope between sand dunes and floodplains, knowing "which floodplain terraces were well drained enough to grow sweet black corn and speckled beans" (Silko 1999, 47). During colonial times, which interrupt traditional patterns of food production, Fleet creatively collects the seeds for her plants from the local town dump (Silko 1999, 22) and then plants them in the ancient dune gardens—a dismissal of colonial ideas of purity reminiscent of Silko's placement of the sacred man Betonie's abode in view of the city dumps of Gallup (in *Ceremony*). When her death draws near, Fleet remains in a grove formed by her apricot tree seedlings, her dead body to be eventually absorbed by the soil which feeds the trees (Silko 1999, 50).

As Ellen Arnold remarks, Silko contrasts Fleet's nurture of spiritual ties between plants and humans with "the extravagant formal gardens of the New England Robber Baron estates, transplanted and forced to bloom at obscene cost," thus exemplifying

> the flowering of capitalism in the Americas, the reshaping of the land for power, profit, and display, that builds on the exploitation and destruction of its native human, animal, and plant inhabitants, and the creation of economic dependencies that prevent subsistence outside the system. (103)

Yet, Arnold continues, Silko's novel resists the seduction of simplistic oppositions between Indigenous and colonial attitudes to the land and its beings. Rather, her novel allows readers to identify capital-driven economic competition as well as patriarchal Western societies' inherent extractivist stance toward "women, indigenous peoples, animals, and earth," imagining possible alliances between these subaltern groups to resist this kind of exploitation (Arnold 103). The novel's avoidance of the notorious colonial binary (Europe vs. its 'Others') and its disclosure of the deep structure of socio-ecological exploitation joins forces with its poetic and sensuous language of transcultural and interspecies friendship.

The fatal embrace of extraction-oriented sexuality on which some of the novels reflect is coupled with representations of interspecies intimacy between Indigenous women and their more-than-human companions. Grandmother Fleet is an iconic traditional knowledge keeper who passes on survival-related information to the younger generation and prepares to have her dead body merge with the soil, feeding her beloved apricot trees with herself. Hogan's *Mean Spirit*, too, includes female characters possessing special knowledge of gardens, rivers, and bees.

Diane Wilson continues this theme with her novel *The Seed Keeper* (2021) which entangles the history of colonial dispossession of land with the politics of cultural disenfranchisement by the disruption of family lines due to poverty, racial violence, and systematic 'reeducation' in boarding schools. In spite of its individualist title, the novel deals with a whole lineage of Dakhóta seed keepers and their efforts in saving their tribe's vegetable seeds from destruction. The protagonist Rosalie Iron Wing is the youngest member of a family who, after having been estranged from her tribe and relatives, manages to reconnect with an elderly aunt waiting to pass on the seeds and knowledge about them before her death. It is not quite certain whether the tradition of plant knowledge, whose earliest keeper survived the traumatic experience of Little Crow's War in 1862, including the execution of 38 Dakhóta men at Mankato, will be passed on to future generations.

The Seed Keeper is also a story about cross-cultural complications: In the 1980s, Rosalie marries a non-Indian farmer whose mother still possessed the

knowledge of vegetable gardening but who feels pressured to join a contract with a company promising exorbitant harvests with its combination of chemical fertilizers and GMO-manipulated patent seeds. Wilson traces the social consequences of this encroachment of an extractive form of agriculture on the local level: the ways in which the new economic scheme, which dictates its conditions to the farmers and prohibits them from using their own seeds, disrupts communities, families, and friendships.[7]

Wilson represents seeds as bearers of life and transmitters of intimacy between humans and more-than-human life. During the Indian wars the Dakhótas' fields and gardens are systematically destroyed to quicken their defeat; Rosalie's ancestor teaches her children how to hide the precious seeds and gardening implements and to memorize the correct planting and harvest times from observing the astronomical constellations. When Rosalie finds the seeds of her husband's deceased mother, she starts planting corn, beans, peas, potatoes, squash, and tomatoes in her house garden, feeling a special "connection" to the woman she never met and "who had kept these seeds to feed her family and left them neatly organized and labeled for the next gardener to care for them" (Wilson 135). She explains to her Dakhóta activist friend the difference between European-style farming and Indigenous gardening while her friend fills her in on the scientific evidence for the causes of groundwater pollution by chemical fertilizers (ibid. 169–72). Rosalie mentions the emotional returns she receives from her interaction with plants:

> I needed the comfort of plants around me, the language of their mute endurance, their ability to survive and thrive and adapt. My father had once pointed out a chokecherry tree that had dropped most of its leaves, while a young tree nearby was thriving. The mother tree had chosen to sacrifice its own health for its offspring, sending its share of nutrients to help the other tree battle a fungus. The young tree recovered and, over time, the mother tree also regrew its leaves. (Wilson 187)

This little description of a tree's "mute endurance," whose resilience goes unnoticed by most humans, transculturates Indigenous plant knowledge with Western knowledge about tree-fungus interaction first described in the 1990s by Canadian forest expert Suzanne Simard, to whose concept of the "mother tree" the passage refers. The scientist in the novel is Rosalie's father who was

7 The company named "Mangenta" is easily identifiable as Monsanto, now part of German Bayer.

dismissed from his job as a school instructor for teaching "Native science" (Wilson 197).

Surrounded by the disastrous effects of the agroindustry on both her social and natural environment, Rosalie retreats into her garden as into a sanctuary:

> Everywhere I looked, I saw how seeds were holding the world together. They planted forests, covered meadows with wildflowers, sprouted in the cracks of sidewalks, or lay dormant until the long-awaited moment came […] Seeds breathed and spoke in a language all their own. Each one was a miniature time capsule, capturing years of stories in its tender flesh. How ignorant I felt compared to the brilliance contained in a single seed. (Wilson 238)

Wilson depicts Rosalie as someone who instinctively develops a natural affection for her vegetable garden in the midst of her husband's extractive field economy. Her aunt Darlene practices her plant knowledge even in the unlikely space of an elderly home and lives long enough to pass on her wisdom about heirloom seeds to her niece. *Seed Keeper* perfectly captures the two very different meanings of "intimacy" discussed in this essay: the total disruption of American farmers' lives by the introduction of ever more extortionary forms of agriculture; and the loving care invested in the growing of food plants. While the community once depended on the thriving of the plants for their physical survival, the plants now allow their modern descendants to reconnect with their cultural roots.

When she entrusts Rosalie with her last traditional seeds, the aged relative tells her to "'Love them like your children, the way you love your son'" (Wilson 327). Unfortunately, the son is rather fascinated with the idea of having the heirloom seeds patented to turn them into money—thus following the modern commercial practice of treating seeds as property. But a tribal elder is sure the seed will work its magic and make the young man change his mind.

The Hum of a Thousand Conversations

The novels analyzed here alert us to the fact that the agricultural and horticultural labor of Indigenous women has received little attention in historical accounts of Indigenous land tenure in North America (and beyond). The discursive hegemony of the colonial hunting trope is indebted to its strategic function as a legal justification of removal and dispossession, as well as to the

physical ephemerality of crop cultivation: Historical descriptions of Indigenous gardens are rare, and if they exist, they mostly refer to the destruction of food crops. The bioarchaeological reconstruction of the former agricultural landscape of the Americas has produced evidence of a much more intense pre-Columbian land tenure than formerly thought (Doolittle; Safier). More work is required to arrive at a realistic assessment of the scope and character of historical Indigenous plant cultivation before and after the Columbian moment, including the decisive role of women within that economy.[8] The novels discussed here contain selective glimpses of that female economy, including its ecological aspect: a recognition of the intimate ties and dependencies between humans and other creatures.

While Erdrich, Hogan, and Silko focus on women as plant experts and knowledge keepers, Wilson also includes seeds themselves in her chorus of voices. In an introductory poem, the seeds speak:

> We surrendered our wildness to live in partnership
> with the Humans.
> Because we cared for each other, the People and
> the Seeds survived. (Wilson n.p.)

The seeds as magic communicators and gardens as sanctuaries of interspecies survival may seem, to a Western rationalistic reader, a slightly esoteric take of a gardener-writer.[9] Yet, many Indigenous writers and gardeners (such as Robin Wall Kimmerer) stress the sacredness of their seeds, which are part of a whole cluster of sacred meanings. I would like to once more return to Louise Erdrich's

8 Robin Wall Kimmerer describes Indigenous planters as "essential partner[s]": "It is she who turns up the soil, she who scares away the crows, and she who pushes seeds into the soil. We are the planters, the ones who clear the land, pull the weeds, and pick the bugs; we save the seeds over winter and plant them again next spring. We are midwives to their gifts […] Corn, beans, and squash are fully domesticated; they rely on us to create the conditions under which they can grow. We too are part of the reciprocity. They can't meet their responsibilities unless we meet ours" (139–40). For the role of Indigenous women in agriculture see also Merchant. For the historical disarticulation of women in agriculture more generally see Federici. For the current global significance of female gardeners see Shiva.

9 Diane Wilson does have a garden. She plants the vegetables in a slightly different order than the classical "three sisters" arrangement, as she reveals in various online videos. Wilson is also the former executive director of the Native American Food Sovereignty Alliance.

Tracks whose fantastic finale consists of Fleur Pillager causing the oak grove surrounding her hut to collapse in a sudden storm probably created by herself: her last gesture of defiance against the powerful logging company waiting to take possession of her land. Nanapush, the narrator of this sequence, witnesses the scene. Just before the final showdown, he is surprised to find that Fleur had tended a garden plot near the lakeshore. The pumpkins and squash now "flourished madly," spreading their leaves and blossoms "almost in defiance" (Erdrich 1988, 218). There are also peas and rhubarb (ibid. 222), a full-grown garden. In reaching her cabin, Nanapush has to pass through an area already clearcut. All that is left of the former forest is a circle of high oaks around Fleur's home. As Nanapush enters her place, he is overwhelmed by the presence of a multitude of living beings:

> I heard the hum of a thousand conversations. Not only the birds and small animals, but the spirits in the western stands had been forced together. The shadows of the trees were crowded with their forms. The twigs spun independently of wind, vibrating like small voices. I stopped, stood among these trees whose flesh was so much older than ours, and it was then that my relatives and friends took final leave, abandoned me to the living. (Erdrich 1988, 220)

Nanapush meets his deceased relatives whose spirits are all crowded into that small space of Fleur's home. Erdrich here imagines a complete collapse of the space-time continuum, a chronotopical clash caused by colonial extractive violence. Fleur's garden is a sacred site, a sanctuary of all spiritual and more-than-human life to be erased: connected to each other by their shared and ancient "flesh."

The intimacy evoked by Hogan, Erdrich, Silko, and Wilson radically differs from the extractive intimacies discussed above. In addition to shedding a critical light on how the members of a patriarchal colonial society gain access to land property by taking possession of Indigenous women's bodies, these novels contain the literary groundwork of an older, companion-species intimacy and its survival throughout the destruction wrought by removal, allotment, and termination policies, as well as colonial 'reeducation.' These texts contribute to the survival and current revival of Indigenous plant cultivation; they form a counterpoint to the colonial discursive and practical deformations of land tenure.

Survival Seeds

In spite of the daily importance of food on the plates of all people, including urban academics, the extractive practice of food production has received relatively little attention from cultural and literary studies discourse. We munch our organically grown bean and cashew burgers without thinking too much about the conditions of their production, nor those of the less healthy conventional foodstuffs many of us can afford to ignore. Plant cultivation and food production are disproportionately controlled by internationally operating corporations using combinations of GMO organisms and chemical fertilizers, which endanger soil and seed health. Food is also the subject of stock market speculation. Yet, the cultural discourse about food more often than not ignores this political dimension, maybe because it is not considered cultural enough or maybe these things range beyond the cognitive horizon of urban academics. The importance of food production flares up in moments of danger—for example, in the Russian war against Ukraine whose blockade of wheat exports threatens to cause a global humanitarian catastrophe. Risking their own lives, Ukrainian farmers managed to sow new seeds in spite of their fields being torn up by tanks and missiles. This truly heroic action demonstrates the importance of these food workers and the necessity to keep food production independent from corporate, speculative, and geopolitical calculus.

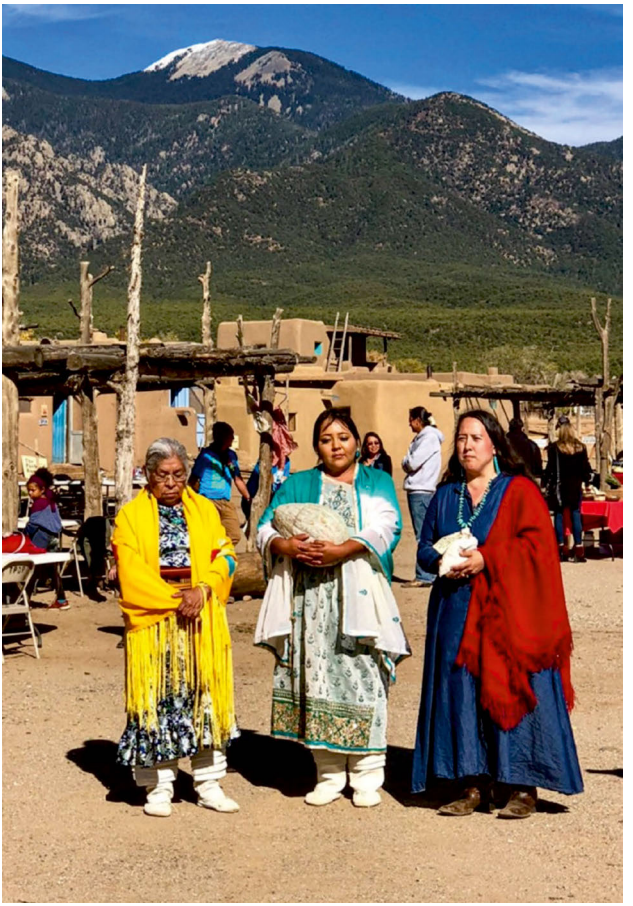
The American monopolistic system of monocrop agriculture, with its degradation of soils and seeds, began in the early 20th century, its impact reaching all the way to the U.S.S.R. As Uta Ruge shows in her eye-opening book *Bauern, Land*, U.S.-made industrial agriculture lay the foundation for the modern global food system in conjunction with the socially incompetent post-Czaristic and Stalinist land management (chapters 33 and 37). In both cases, imperial agriculture depended on population control, including, in the United States, the theft of fertile soils by means of Indian Removal, allotment privatization, and termination. These policies led to the disenfranchisement of Indigenous women from their function as food producers. The result, as Christina Gish Hill contends, was a "profound loss of knowledge and [...] [a] damaged seed stock" (93). Today, there are efforts to unmake some of the effects of this policy. Local food sovereignty initiatives are a response to the fatal hegemony of extractive food production. Rural and urban garden projects are sprouting around the globe. They testify to a reawakening of the half-forgotten intimacy between humans and plants, and they provide future gen-

erations with a knowledge that may be decisive for their health and survival. Indigenous garden projects in North America also give the lie to the popular discourse of Indian nomadism that still frequently serves as a rationalization of dispossession. These projects are reminders of the fact that seeds are not only food but also, as Hill writes, "relatives, ancestors, and sacred entities" (98). Gardens are not only places for food production but works of art in their own right, offering the gardener a great potential for aesthetic creativity.[10] In addition to their potential for art, seeds are a natural archive, holding genetic knowledge, and are tied to cultural and cultivation-related knowledges. As both seed sovereignty and food sovereignty depend on the control over land, the repurchase of fertile land is therefore one of the principal activities toward Indigenous cultural survival.

To refer to the heirloom seeds' "mute endurance" (Wilson 187) is to mark their invisibility within the colonial episteme as well as their resilience. Indeed, they may just owe their "endurance" to their very "muteness" or invisibility, their ability to range below extraction agriculture's possessive radar. Every now and then, a plant believed to be extinct shows up again because its seed was preserved by an Indigenous gardener. The image (fig. 1) of Tiana Suazo from Taos cradling her heirloom pumpkin with unadorned tenderness resonates with the power of an epic story yet waiting to be fully told.

10 Formal flower gardens or landscape gardens are accepted as aesthetically pleasing, if not outright works of art—the culmination of a culture of taste whose historical rise was concurrent with that of European expansion. Vegetable gardens are less frequently the subject of aesthetic attention—wrongly so, as the creativity invested in the shaping of contemporary organic gardens shows. My favorite is in Klein Jasedow, a village near the island of Usedom, which is tended by members of the European Academy of Healing Arts. Each year it has a different shape, due to the necessarily changing arrangements of flower and vegetable plants. See Europäische Akademie der Heilenden Künste—EUROPEAN ACADEMY OF HEALING ARTS (https://eaha.org).

Figure 1: Tiana Suazo of Taos Pueblo cradling a squash that had been gone from the community for many years, but whose seeds were found in the Seed Savers Exchange collections, where Rowen White (red shawl) serves as chair of the board and has endeavored to return as many of the seeds originating from Native communities back to their original homes. Henrietta Gomez, in the yellow shawl, is a respected seed keeper in the Taos Pueblo community.



Text and photo by Elizabeth Hoover, October 2018 (Hoover 2021).

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