

What We Leave Behind: Exploring Multiple Environmental Legacies in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes*¹

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Leslie Marmon Silko grew up in the Laguna Pueblo in New Mexico, of mixed Laguna and Polish ancestry. Her first novel, *Ceremony*, published in 1977, was part of a first wave of successful Native American fiction and poetry. Appearing in the wake of the Vietnam War, it concerns problems faced by Indian veterans of the Second World War. Complex and profound, local and cosmological, postmodern in its intricacies yet with every move it makes drawn from its indigenous cultural roots, it has a place now as an American classic. Silko's next novel, *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) is even more complex in its structure, derived from indigenous concepts of time and ways of storytelling, and broader in scope, showing centuries of the history of indigenous dispossession weighing on a country and a Western culture mired in darkness. *Gardens in the Dunes* (1996) is at first glance as different from these earlier novels as one could imagine. Formally, it harks back to the Victorian novel with its descriptive realism and intertwining plots. Early reviews show ambivalence about the novel; later criticism will tease out the novel's complexities and its play with traditional novelistic tropes. The general trend of criticism of the novel has been to focus on ways in which its intricacies deal with ideas of agency and of representations of Native Americans. I approach it from an ecocritical perspective and explore its depiction of a range of practices in relation to gardening and horticulture and its valuing of ancient legacies. I also discuss what I see as a disjunction between certain narrative trajectories and the ability of the gardens in the dunes—the beginning and end of the young (adolescent) Native American girl Indigo's journey—to offer a visionary view of sustainable agriculture.

Gardens in the Dunes addresses Native American political issues but the legacies it teases out—the vestiges of good practice, known as husbandry—are about gardens as a point of intersection of (non-human) nature and culture. Indigo's hybrid garden functions both as a signifier of indigenous agency and as that centre of meaning where it is one earth, one garden, one humanity. Indigo, the child who becomes a young woman and who is our observing vehicle for most of the novel, tells not of how we control the earth but of how two different kinds of agency—that of the human and non-human—get to know and accommodate to each other. This is a very powerful message. Husbandry is the old term for the process, defined by the OED as the care and breeding of plants and animals, and more recently as the management and conservation of resources. I see the latter part of the definition as a redundancy, for it is what husbandry has always been. Human beings haven't consistently taken good care of their environments. But we wouldn't be here today if there weren't legacies of sensitivity and common sense in this regard, of which, to use Simon Schama's words, there are 'veins beneath the surface'.



Fig. 1 *Datura starmonium* (Datura Lily). (Source: photo by Jennifer Nielsen Kahn, taken on the Devil's Garden Trail in Arches National Park, Utah, 2010)

The events of *Gardens in the Dunes* take place somewhere between the late 1890s and World War One – that is to say, encompassing the last years of the

Gilded Age and the optimism of Theodore Roosevelt (exemplified in episodes relating to the building of a large earth dam and in ill-conceived hubristic commercial projects) as well as the continuing dispossession of Native American peoples. This setting, a time when a robust economic vision licensed a cavalier approach to management of the natural world as resource, makes an excellent vehicle for reflection on practices today. Not only the time in which it is set, but parallel plotting and an interpolated narrative give the sense of a broadly scoped nineteenth century realist novel.

The central character, Indigo, has been brought up leading a sheltered life with her grandmother, mother and sister, out of sight of the Indian police, in the dunes of the Mojave desert, with occasional sojourns in the town of Needles (California) where the family camped on the riverbank and sold baskets to tourists at the train station. At a Ghost Dance with disciples of Wovoka (to summon the Messiah), Indigo and her sister are separated from their mother and after the death of their grandmother at their hiding place in the dunes, Indigo is captured by the Indian police, sent to an Indian school in California, runs away and finds refuge with a woman, Hattie, from the North East, newly married to a botanist and plant hunter (read plant thief), Edward.²

A second narrative thread involves Indigo's sister, Sister Salt. This sub-plot could make a novel in its own right. Its setting is the large dam project. Its trajectory takes Sister Salt to motherhood through her relationship with a black cook, Candy. This story also involves a female Mexican revolutionary who steals Candy's savings. Candy is last seen in pursuit of her. Sister Salt returns to the dunes with her baby. A third narrative thread is Hattie's *bildung* story, in tandem with Indigo's. Edward's back-story of an ill-fated expedition to Brazil to steal precious orchids is told in a long interpolated narrative. Indigo is the principal focaliser of the novel. To say it is narrated in the 'third person' is an over-simplification, for Silko is highly practiced in the subtle arts of the 'storyteller' and makes abundant use of free indirect discourse.³

The trajectory of the novel might best be called a garden tour. (Perhaps we have here a sub-genre of the voyage narrative.) And there is a strong sense that the reader, like Indigo, is on tour. Already familiar with the sustaining plants that grow in the gardens in the dunes, we now encounter Edward's Californian citrus orchard where Indigo has taken refuge and where Hattie is planning a decorative garden. Ian Tyrrell, in his comparative study of Californian and Australian horticulture, *True Gardens of the*

Gods, explains the moral and somewhat utopian underpinnings of the development of Californian horticulture (as against pastoralism and agricultural monocultures) and discusses the connection of this small-scale vision with the impulse to create gardens, involving both aesthetics and acclimatization. In the light of Tyrrell's discussion, we might see this episode in Silko's novel as a snapshot of the Californian horticultural project, encompassing a citrus orchard, Edward's morally-toned but practically scurrilous hunting for non-endemic species to acclimatise, and Hattie's aesthetic project and higher sense of moral purpose for her life in California.

Edward is about to set out on another expedition, this time to Corsica, to steal *citrus medica* cuttings. The highly protected Corsican industry at that time thrived on the growing popularity of candied citrus peel, made from this particular variety of citrus. After appeasing the director of the Indian school, Hattie persuades Edward that Indigo should go along with them. And here begins the garden tour. Before embarking for Europe, they stay with Hattie's father in Massachusetts. We are introduced to his experimental farming practices and, right next door, to the elaborately landscaped gardens of Edward's sister, Susan. In England, the party stays with Hattie's Great-Aunt Bronwyn who lives near Bath, surrounded by a mystical garden inherited from her English grandfather. On the way to Corsica, they spend some time in Italy with Laura, a friend of Hattie's and an amateur archaeologist, in her classical but equally mystical garden. The Corsica expedition proves to be as ill-fated as we by now have come to expect Edward's enterprises to be. Edward ends up in jail for the attempted theft, and eventually dead, thanks to a fraudulent Australian doctor he meets on the voyage to Corsica and who inveigles him into digging up meteorites in the Arizona desert, where he falls ill.

Gardens in the Dunes explores a range of legacies of connection with the earth through ways of working with it. Silko says in a note appended to the Scribner edition of the novel:

Nearly all human cultures plant gardens, and the garden itself has ancient religious connections. For a long time I've been interested in pre-Christian European beliefs, and the pagan devotions to sacred groves of trees and sacred springs.⁴

Aunt Bronwyn joins in the remnant celebrations of old Somerset customs:

Yet despite the persecution, the old customs persisted – dairy keepers spilled a bit of milk for the fairies, morning and night; on the first night of August, a few people (Aunt Bronwyn was one of them) still gathered around fires on nearby hilltops until dawn, though the church tried to outlaw such practices centuries before. People still bowed to the standing stones at crossroads and threw coins into springs and lakes. (*Gardens*, 261)

Simon Schama describes his book *Landscape and Memory* as 'an excavation below our conventional sight-level to recover the veins of myth and memory that lie beneath the surface' (Schama 14). This could describe the workings of Silko's novel, with the Bath episode, involving both literal excavation of the Roman bath and the recreations of ancient practices in Aunt Hattie's garden as a *mise en abime* of Silko's project. Bronwyn reveres sacred stones in her garden 'that dance and walk after midnight'

(*Gardens*, 237) and takes her visitors to see the nearby Stanton Drew stone circle. She has a herd of white cattle that

belonged to the moon.... The sun was only partly visible now through the trees, but in the last shafts of light the cattle appeared to be shimmering white, almost silver, as they emerged from the apple trees ... Aunt Bronwyn pointed at the sky to the southwest, where Indigo saw the thick white horn of the moon. (238-9)

Hattie has a vision of white light (the moon goddess) at night in Bronwyn's garden. Hattie's journey is a journey back, a tale of retrieval. Indigo will make something different on the skeleton of old ways in the desert garden, having grown from a fearful child into an accomplished and self-assured young person. Hattie's journey is presented as a movement away from her own beginnings towards new revelations, self-awareness and a (modified) independence, and the mechanisms of change for her are both spiritual (the goddess) and sexual. The sexual experiences are all with men and all in some way an assault: harassment by a fellow theological student at Harvard Divinity School where Hattie was enrolled first as a non-degree student, progressing to permission to write a Master's thesis, only to have her topic, 'the Female Principle in the Early Church', rejected; harassment by the Australian doctor; and, near the end, a vicious assault and rape by the owner of a livery stable.⁵ Both the negative sexual experiences and the spiritual visions of the goddess lead Hattie towards the old, to a more remote past, with Bronwyn among her mists and stones.

The travelling party now moves on to Italy and to the gardens of Bronwyn's friend Laura, surrounding an old villa in the hills behind Lucca. Laura, who is a collector of ancient artifacts, has imposed upon the garden's traditional style a sense of order based on ancient mythical schemata relating to fertility. The most spectacular sight for the visitors is a garden of black gladiolus. 'To the old Europeans', Laura tells them, 'black was the color of fertility and birth, the color of the Great Mother' (296). Ancient statues and artifacts throughout the gardens relate to fertility. Recalling Adela Quested's cave experience in *A Passage to India*, a stone in a grotto induces in Hattie a moment of panic:

In the stone niche at the back of the grotto Hattie noticed an egg-shaped sandstone ... As they approached it, Hattie noticed the stone was engraved with what appeared to be an eye on its end or the outline of a curled snake. She was about to reach out to touch its edge when suddenly she recognized it was a human vulva!

She stepped back so suddenly she bumped into Indigo. The dank odors of the grotto closed around her – she must get to fresh air at once! (290)

These English and Italian gardens have a kind of integrity missing in those of Edward's wealthy sister Susan on Long Island. Susan's estate represents the European 'landscape' tradition as conspicuous consumption.⁶ When the party visit on their outward journey, Susan is in the process of demolishing spectacular Italianate gardens that have just reached their maturity, in order to replace them with gardens in the English style (meaning here the English landscape tradition inherited from Capability Brown and other eighteenth century gardeners). The visitors witness the moving of two great copper beech trees from a nearby farm to Susan's garden. We see the removal

through Indigo's eyes as a tree lies 'helpless' on a wagon, 'the stain of damp earth like dark blood [seeping] through the canvas.' Indigo 'heard low creeks and groans – not sounds of the wagons but from the trees' (183). Having grown up in the gardens in the dunes with her grandmother, Indigo has a strong animistic sense of the nature of things. Hers is the perspective that mostly guides the reader throughout the story.

Susan too has her rituals. Before the Italian gardens disappear, she presents her 'Masque of the Blue Garden,' a society ball under the full moon but with no resonances, nothing like the meaningful connections Indigo and Hattie will find in Bronwyn's Bath garden. For Susan and Edward, plants, far from having souls, as they do for Indigo, Hattie, and Bronwyn, are 'exquisite tokens' (Ryan 127) within the world of capitalist imperialism.⁷ 'Ritual', says A.M. Hocart, 'involves a rule of life, whereas economics are a rule of gain' (35). Therein lies the difference between the motivations behind the gardens of Bronwyn and Laura and the gardens in the dunes and those behind Susan's gardens and Edward's commercial botanizing. While many aspects of Susan's garden are entrancing to Indigo, this garden will clearly never be a model for her of what a garden should be. Laura's formal garden has, like the gardens in the dunes, old bones and is, as well, recuperated by the presence of ancient sculptures, by its 'wilder' spaces, and by ancient botanical connections (the black gladiolus, for example) behind its formality. This garden, too, we seem to be being told, has indigenous roots.

The gardens in the dunes begin and end the novel. Here is a glimpse:

Grandma Fleet told them the old gardens had always been there. The old-time people found the gardens already growing, planted by the sand Lizard, relative of Grandfather Snake, who invited his niece to settle there and cultivate her seeds. Sand Lizard warned her children to share...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. (*Gardens* 14-15)

A Western reader is bound to think: 'Eden'. And indeed they are visionary gardens, the mythic and emotional heart of the book. But the point of these gardens seems to me precisely that they are not presented as lost, as an object of nostalgia, something to be laboriously (and perhaps hopelessly) striven after. They thrive. They may suffer, there may have been attempts to destroy them, but seeds, vestiges, persist to flourish again under good conditions, which include good husbandry. Here we are surely invited to read a metaphor for Indian survival – but certainly not an allegory, for this novel persistently links the survival of all sentient beings with the survival of the earth. The one may suggest the other in the fiction but, actually, signifier and signified are inseparable. Barbara K. Robins, drawing on a discussion between Vine Deloria Jr. and Dan Wildcat, describes indigenous husbandry as requiring 'sophisticated transferral

[sic] of knowledge and a moral sensibility concerning one's relationship to all other beings within one's environment' (40).

In *Ceremony*, Tayo, the central character, is sent to an old medicine man for a healing ceremony; the old man stresses the importance of change. 'Only growth', he says, 'keeps the ceremonies strong' (26). Indigo's has been, not a healing journey but one of growth. And she is to be the agent of change in the rituals and in the husbandry of the gardens. Resourceful and resilient, she looks and listens with attention wherever she goes – and she gathers: information, seeds, corms and plants (some of Edward's orchids). When Indigo and her sister, with whom she is reunited, and her sister's baby return to the dunes, the old rattlesnake who lived by the spring has been slaughtered and the gardens wrecked. A year later: 'Down the shoulder of the dune to the hollow between the dunes, silver and white gladiolus with pale blues and pale lavenders glowed among the great jade datura leaves' (*Gardens* 476). Corn, amaranth (native staples), the revered datura, and gladiolus grow together. And what's more, Indigo has discovered you can eat the gladiolus corm – 'gladiolus spud!' (476) Indigo and Sister Salt perform a ritual with the bones of the dead snake, burying him next to their grandmother. Soon, a younger snake appears at the spring – and so ends the novel.

Suzanne Ruta says of *Gardens in the Dunes*, in her review in the *New York Times*, that 'instead of voices, it has agendas'.⁸ James Barilla discusses the sophistication with which Silko rings thoughtful changes on the topic of introduced species. 'Silko', he writes, 'proposes that the value of collecting, and appropriation more generally, depends upon the status of the trader' (168). The subtlety of Silko's argument lies in details easily missed: that, for example, Edward takes cuttings (the *citrus medica*) whereas Indigo collects seeds and corms (though she does hang on to one or two of Edward's orchids). Seeds, says Barilla, 'are symbols of biological sovereignty and wildness; cuttings represent the transformation of the plant into commodity' (168). And the book, overall, he suggests, is utterly postmodern in its view of invasiveness:

Yet to enter this garden [in the dunes] narrative is to experience novelty at its most intense in both the postmodern and preservationist sense, since the garden is both remote from murderous Euramerican settlers, and an incorporation of their ideas and genes. Newness has invaded the oasis. The desire for novelty demands that the process of maintaining native species and controlling invasives offer opportunities for newness and creativity to enter while also preserving a sense of the past, and it is this ambivalent, postmodern preservationist impulse that shapes the narrative of the garden space. (170)

The 'irony' of Silko's vision, then, as Barilla concludes, is 'that it accepts the traditional biological naturalisms of place while shifting the focus to the validity of human cultures moving permanently out of their appropriate geographic ranges' (172).

I believe this is contained in the 'gardens in the dunes' that so quietly draw together the deep and multiple threads of meaning of a book that seems to be all multi-faceted surface and description. Rachel Barritt Coda is right to say that when one digs deep into the often unorthodox use of tense in the many flashbacks, one can see at work a subtle undermining of the rhetorical certainties of the nineteenth century novel. And yet, as Ruta observes, I find much about this novel that is disturbing, and not in the sense of a useful unsettling. I described above the trajectory of Hattie's story as a

movement towards the new but also towards the ancient roots of her own ancestry, through spiritual and sexual experiences. The close to the novel, however, is profoundly disappointing and just a little ridiculous.

Feminist semiotics teaches us to see the rape of Hattie (on her return to Needles, on her way to see Indigo and her sister), the assault, her nakedness, as a punishment – by the perpetrators, of course, but also by the author. Heather Neilson has pointed to the presence in the novel of a number of ‘sympathetic’ white female characters (2001 np). And as Silko has commented, Hattie is based on significant models in the nineteenth century figures of Margaret Fuller, who is alluded to in the novel in patronising terms by those who disapprove of Hattie’s education, and Alice James (for the tragedy of a failure to flourish) (Arnold 18). Yet what good is served, apart from banging yet another nail into the coffin of white males in the book, by having Hattie’s story take this turn? As if the assault isn’t enough, she escapes from her mother and father who’ve come to fetch and look after her and burns down the livery stable of her rapist. It needs a master of melodrama like Dickens to pull this off. And the last we hear of Hattie, she is with Bronwyn, traveling to Scotland to look at more old stones and then on to Italy. How sad that such a modified (as I said above) independence is granted to this lively, intelligent woman.

The nineteenth century role models may have had difficult lives, but this is not a nineteenth century novel. Indigo is not given what would assuredly have been her turn-of-the-century fate; the fate of these Dune survivors is not that of Ishi⁹ – instead, we are granted a vision of survival. Hattie could have been going on to become the great scholar of religion she had started out to be. And perhaps the reader can write this in for her in the future, but in the novel she, as it were, vanishes into the Scottish mist, sent back to her own European roots – no place for her in the new garden of America, taking the fight up to her own American roots from what she has learned from Indigo. Ruta sees all the non-indigenous characters as ‘rigged archetypes’. This may be true of Edward (though the novel invites a qualified sympathy for him), but it hardly applies to Hattie’s father or to the male characters we meet in Sister Salt’s story. What I do see as ‘rigged’, however, is the complete writing off of anything other than ‘indigenous’ gardening. Susan may be a prey to conspicuous consumption, but in this episode the whole tradition of Western ‘landscape’ gardening seems to be dismissed. Where Hattie’s father’s agricultural experiments are somewhat bossy and misguided and take no note of Indian dispossession (Ryan 122), yet in the presentation of the projects of these two characters, as in the fate assigned to Hattie, there is no whisper of the postmodern subtleties i.e. the inclusiveness that Costa sees in the gardens in the dunes.

Indigo responds to the gardens in their entrancing functional beauty; the liveliness of the detail in the narrative is so abundant, so generous. And it is because I believe with Barilla and Ryan in the strength of the book’s environmental message that I feel it important to address what seem to me serious weaknesses in the novel’s fabric. The points with which I take issue potentially undo what so often seem a forceful multicultural message, one of reconciliation, and ultimately ecological. Susan, as Ryan says, ‘leaves nothing as it is’ (124) and her garden creation is all about conquest. There is no room in this narrative to see that this does not necessarily apply completely to the landscape tradition, as she is the only representative. The tradition is not only represented by its worst excesses, and this book is not *Almanac of the Dead* in its compelling bleakness. At the heart of my sense of misjudgment in *Gardens in the*

Dunes is that, while change becomes a significant feature of the gardens in the dunes, Bronwyn's and Laura's gardens are simply paths to the past, and of the possibility of either Susan or Hattie's father learning from Indigo that there is no hope. The only potential agent of change within the non-indigenous American context, Hattie, has left the country.

NOTES

1. The process of developing this conference paper into an essay, was greatly helped by discussing with colleagues at ANZASA 2012. Special thanks go to Heather Neilson (UNSW) and Judith Seaboyer (UQ).
3. The 'Ghost (Spirit) Dance' movement originated in Nevada in 1870 and was revived in 1889 by Wovoka (also known as Jack Wilson), a Paiute Shaman. He had a vision of Native American peoples being returned to the life they had led before white invasion, but the path to this outcome was to involve not war but peaceful coexistence with whites, though, as the persecution portrayed in *Gardens* suggests, the whites misunderstood or refused to believe that the movement posed no threat. The ritual for this set of beliefs involved dancing in a circle and—from the Christian tradition in which Wovoka had also been educated—a Messiah or Jesus figure. *Gardens in the Dunes* incorporates a 'Ghost Dance' that Silko said is based on a dance held at Kingman, Arizona in 1893 (Arnold 167). The Ghost Dance in *Gardens* is discussed at length in David L. Moore's 'Ghost Dancing Through History in Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes* and *Almanac of the Dead*'.
4. For a penetrating discussion of the use of tenses and free indirect discourse in this novel see Rachel Barritt Costa's 'Flashbacks and Free Indirect Discourse in *Gardens in the Dunes: a Linguistic Analysis of Non-Chronological Narration*'.
5. 'A Scribner Paperback Fiction Reading Group Guide', *Gardens in the Dunes*, np. For further comments by Silko on the book, see Ellen Arnold's *Conversations with Leslie Marmon Silko*.
6. Hattie's father arranges for her to attend lectures at Harvard Divinity School as a nondegree student until she proves herself capable of graduate work. She develops an interest in the Gnostics and in women in the early church. (Silko, *Gardens* 92-102).
7. Silko herself uses this term in relation to Susan's project. See Arnold 181).
8. 'Aunt Bronwyn was an avid follower of the theories of Gustav Fechner, who believed plants have souls and human beings exist only to be consumed by plants and transformed into glorious new plant life'. (Silko, *Gardens* 240).
9. Suzanne Ruta, 'Dances with Ghosts'. *The New York Times*, 18 April 1999. 29 May 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/04/18/reviews/990418.18rutalt.html>.
10. Ishi, the 'last' member of the Yahi, from the Yana group of Native American people in California, was found in the outskirts of the town of Oroville, California, in 1911. His group until then had lived beyond contact with white people. He died of tuberculosis in 1916. See Robert F. Heizer and Theodora Kroeber, eds.

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