

04. Revitalizing Indigenous Food Systems in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes*¹

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Abstract

This study examines Leslie Marmon Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999) in terms of its parallelisms with the Lebanese ethnobotanist Gary Paul Nabhan's works as a pioneer of the local food movement and heirloom seed-saving practice. Drawing on the spiritual heritage of her indigenous culture, Silko displays the consequences of settler colonialism on Native lands, particularly through agricultural knowledge loss and disappearing food diversity. Featuring a character, Indigo, who counters this erasure through the seeds she collects from her domestic and transatlantic journeys, Silko offers a model for recovering Indigenous foodways. Similarly, leading many research projects, coordinating farming alliances, and having been a motivational speaker about the significance of "place-based" foods, Nabhan dedicates himself to recover native food traditions in the American Southwest. The fictional landscape where the Sand Lizard people live and the areas Nabhan conducts his research among Indigenous communities both take place around the lower Colorado River basin and the Sonoran Desert borderlands. I argue that Indigo, as the protagonist of *Gardens* is a literary foreshadowing of the ideal models Nabhan imagines to achieve biocultural restoration, due to her transnational seed collecting effort during her travels. With her dream of planting the seeds back in her own land parallels to Nabhan's own practice of local food and what he advocates putting into practice in *Where Our Food Comes From* (2008), to revitalize food security and sustainability on a global scale.

Keywords: Leslie Marmon Silko, *Gardens in the Dunes*, Gary Paul Nabhan, Local Food Movement, Indigenous Foodways

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Leslie Marmon Silko'nun *Gardens in the Dunes* Romanında Yerli Gıda Sistemlerini Yeniden Canlandırmak³

Öz

Bu çalışma, Leslie Marmon Silko'nun *Gardens in the Dunes* (*Kumullardaki Bahçeler*) (1999) adlı eserini, yerel gıda hareketinin ve ata tohumu saklama pratiğinin öncülerinden Lübnan asıllı etnobotanikçi Gary Paul Nabhan'ın çalışmalarıyla olan paralellikleri açısından incelemektedir. Kendi yerli kültürünün manevi mirasından yararlanan Silko, yerleşimci sömürgeciliğin yerli toprakları üzerindeki sonuçlarını, özellikle tarımsal bilgi kaybı ve yok olan gıda çeşitliliği üzerinden gözler önüne serer. Ülke içi ve transatlantik yolculuklarından topladığı tohumlar aracılığıyla bu silinmeye karşı çıkan Indigo adlı bir karakteri merkezine alan Silko, yerli gıda geleneklerini geri kazanmak için bir model sunar. Benzer şekilde, birçok araştırma projesine liderlik eden, çiftçilik ittifaklarını koordine eden ve "yöreye özgü" gıdaların önemi hakkında motivasyon konuşmaları yapan Nabhan, kendisini Amerikan Güneybatısı'ndaki yerli gıda geleneklerini geri kazanmaya adanmıştır. Sand Lizard (Kum Kertenkelesi) halkının yaşadığı kurgusal coğrafya ile Nabhan'ın yerli topluluklar arasında araştırmalarını yürüttüğü bölgelerin her ikisi de aşağı Colorado Nehri havzası ve Sonoran Çölü sınır bölgelerinde yer almaktadır. Bu çalışma, *Gardens*'in ana karakteri olan Indigo'nun, seyahatleri sırasındaki ulus ötesi tohum toplama çabası sayesinde, Nabhan'ın biyokültürel restorasyonu gerçekleştirmek için hayal ettiği ideal modellerin edebi bir habercisi olduğunu öne sürer. Indigo'nun tohumları kendi topraklarında yeniden ekme rüyası, Nabhan'ın kendi yerel gıda pratiğiyle ve küresel ölçekte gıda güvenliğini ve sürdürülebilirliği yeniden canlandırmak amacıyla yaklaşık on yıl sonra *Where Our Food Comes From* (*Yiyeceklerimiz Nereden Geliyor*) (2008) adlı eserinde hayata geçirmeyi savunduğu ilkelerle paralellik göstermektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Leslie Marmon Silko, *Kumullardaki Bahçeler*, Gary Paul Nabhan, Yerel Yiyecek Hareketi, Yerli Yemek Kültürü

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Introduction

Leslie Marmon Silko, a contemporary Native American writer, known for her versatility as a writer has enriched the Native American Canon with her poems, short stories, essays, an autobiography, a volume of letters with the poet James Wright, and three novels; respectively, *Ceremony* (1977), *Almanac of the Dead* (1991), *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999). According to Karenne Wood, reading Silko's third and final novel, *Gardens in the Dunes*, resembles "enter[ing] a world of exotic blossoms and sunlight, to inhale the various perfumes of flowers and the scent of moist earth in an elaborate greenhouse, to recall that timeless relationship to the earth through an understanding of seasonal cycles and the promise we recognize in a handful of healthy seeds" (1999, p. 71). In other words, *Gardens* imbues the reader with a sense of optimism and generosity, intricately connected with nature and its bounties. Considering the material and cultural destruction on Indigenous populations during the Westward Expansion, it is unlikely that Silko's narrative is detached from political critique.

The events narrated in the book occur around the end of the nineteenth century when the American Frontier was announced to be closed. At the time, the nation's formation process included the removal of Native Americans to reservations in the West. Through her portrayal of the characters, Silko reveals that she looked to pay tribute to the numerous tribes that were exterminated in the name of so-called civilization (Arnold, 1998, p. 3). Having a thematic similarity with other indigenous narratives such as *House Made of Dawn* (1968) by N. Scott Momaday, *Solar Storms* (1995) by Linda Hogan, *Tracks* (1988) by Louise Erdrich, *Gardens* is also written with a particular emphasis on the significance of eco-centric consciousness. Silko's approach to forced relocation and accompanying losses differs, however, in her foregrounding of seed saving and preserving botanical knowledge as strategic tools for epistemic disobedience. The lost agricultural traditions are revived by a female protagonist, who is an active guardian of traditional ecological knowledge, preserving and putting it into practice. The Native American people have their own sustainable farming methods and practices before Europeans colonize the New World (Kang, 2016, p. 28). Drawing on the spiritual heritage of her indigenous culture, Silko displays the unreasonable justification of settler colonialism on Native lands and revolts against the prevalent stereotypes such as "savage," "hostile," beastlike men," ascribed to the indigenous people (Nash, 1972, p. 199). The story primarily centers on Indigo, a ten-year-old girl of the indigenous tribe of the Sand Lizard people. Together with her grandmother Grandma Fleet, her mother, and her sister, Sister Salt, Indigo is one of the last survivors of her tribe. When their mother is taken by the federal troops during a performance of the Ghost Dance, Indigo and her sister start to live with Grandma Fleet in a sand dune region along the east of Colorado River. To survive, Grandma Fleet engages in the practice of "subsistence agriculture" as a "continuation of agricultural traditions that had been in practice for thousands of years" (Ryan, 2007, p. 118). The sisters learn not only how to grow Indian food from amaranth plants to sunflowers but also develop an ethical relationship with land. When Indigo is taken to the boarding school, her path crosses Hattie, a newly married white scholar. With Hattie's husband Edward, the three take a journey through diverse gardens across the continents, each having their own agenda.

In an interview with Ellen Arnold, Silko acknowledges that she has created a political novel in terms of culinary practices and skills of Native Americans because "how you grow your food, [or] whether you eat" is quite political (1998, p. 3). Realizing the difficulty of growing one's own food through her experience of cultivation in her small garden in Tucson, Silko decides to write a book about "gardens and flowers," not only to acclaim the older food traditions but also, to counter the pressure of political neutrality on the minorities (Arnold, 1998, p. 2). Within this context, garden imagery foregrounds the

discussion of the disappearing food diversity and cultural heritage after the Indigenous dispossession. However, instead of fixating on the erasure and dispossession, with her *Gardens in the Dunes*, Silko is “seeking out like-minded peoples who are open to new visions and to change, and who share a deep commitment to the earth and the human spirit” (Aldama, 2000, p. 458). In doing so, Silko situates the concept of garden as a site for exploring the recovery of food sovereignty through a literary framework. So far, the existing scholarship has mostly read *Gardens* through colonialism, the theme of transcultural hybrid identity, and Indigenous dispossession. By addressing these issues, this study also seeks to examine the novel through contemporary Indigenous food sovereignty movement and Gary Paul Nabhan’s ethnobotanical discourse, focusing on its epistemic reclamation.⁴

During her travels, Indigo engages in seed saving, a practice central to Indigenous food security. In *Recovering the Sacred: The Power of Naming and Claiming* (2005), Winona LaDuke mentions how seeds have been treated as “common property” by the agrarian communities since prehistoric times “with a percentage of every harvest carefully saved for the next planting” (p. 115). However, the contact with the European settlers was a heavy blow to Native American communities, not only in terms of land but also food. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they were exposed to a series of extermination policies, including land grabbing, bison genocide, and deliberate destruction of arable land and water supplies. In critiquing “this scorched earth policy,” La Duke argues that reliance on “commodity foods” in government rations and decreasing physical activity have led to major health problems for the Indigenous people in the ensuing period (2005, p.191). Of equal significance is the fact that Indian traditional food systems encompass many socio-cultural dynamics that have simultaneously disrupted. Hoover and Mihesuah underscore the consequences of this calculated socio-economic dependency by stating, “[A]s the availability of foods declined, so too have the stories, languages, cultural practices, interpersonal relationships, and outdoor activities implicated in those food systems” (2019, p.7). In this vein, the layered dispossession process indicated by Indigenous Food Sovereignty scholars stretches back to the era Silko covers in *Gardens*. Indigo’s seed saving in the midst of the devastation in the nineteenth century thus has a cultural and political aspect at the intersection of race and colonization.

In their co-edited volume on nutritional colonialism, Elizabeth Hoover and Devon A. Mihesuah inspire a return to ancestral foodways by pointing to contemporary food projects and emphasize regaining cultural knowledge regarding Indigenous food production as a form of decolonial practice. Highlighting the lasting impacts of damage to Native food practices in the same volume, Rowen White defines the significance of seeds and the recent seed sovereignty movement, locating seeds as “testament to resiliency of [Indigenous] people” (2019, p. 190). Within this context, this collective effort, driven by community-based projects such as the Indigenous Seedkeepers Network and the Native American Food Sovereignty Alliance (NAFZA), is a vessel for Native people to protect heirloom seeds from profit-driven companies and to heal from systematic injustices. On cultural and historical meanings of seeds for native populations, White states, “The seeds are the witnesses of the past, and also the hope for the future” (2019, p. 191). Furthermore, the Lebanese ethnobotanist Gary Paul Nabhan stresses the significance of seeds, claiming that they are encapsulations of ecological knowledge as the culmination of millions of years of plant-animal co-evolution (1989, p. xv). He posits that Indigenous seeds are “living reverberations” of biocultural history, shaped by historical and aesthetic choices of past cultures, reflecting their tastes, values, and environmental choices (1989, p. xv). Nevertheless, the forced

⁴ It is important to note that Indigenous food sovereignty also encompasses the revitalization of practices such as hunting, fishing, and foraging (Hoover, 2019, p.85). However, this study primarily focuses on methods to restore Indigenous farming and to pass down the traditional knowledge to subsequent generations.

relocation not only destroyed these, but it also perpetuates a dietary intervention since corporations control agricultural lands, seed systems, and genetic resources today. Consequently, Nabhan's formulation of heirloom seeds as living archives of co-evolution, which need to be conserved also indicates the necessity of reclamation of Indigenous agricultural practices for cultural and social continuity. Nabhan's biocultural diversity framework simultaneously corresponds to Kyle Powys Whyte's concept of "collective continuance," "a society's overall adaptive capacity to maintain its members' cultural integrity, health, economic vitality, and political order into the future" (2018, p.355). Accordingly, preserving traditional agricultural practices is crucial for Indigenous sovereignty, as it is deeply intertwined with this adaptive restructuring of food systems.

In this regard, Silko's *Gardens* offers a visionary role that Gary Paul Nabhan advocates putting into practice specifically in his *Enduring Seeds* (1989) and *Where Our Food Comes From* (2008), to revitalize Indigenous food systems and sustain community resilience. His extensive work and field-based practice on the Native American lands around the US-Mexico border constitutes the conceptual bridge of this study. There is a great geographical parallelism between where the Sand Lizard people live in Silko's fictional setting and the areas Nabhan conducts his research among Indigenous communities, since both take place around the lower Colorado River basin and the Sonoran Desert borderlands. I argue that Indigo, as the protagonist of *Gardens* is a literary foreshadowing of the ideal models Nabhan imagines to achieve biocultural restoration, due to her transnational seed collecting effort. Her gathering comes forward as a form of relational solidarity that includes both Indigenous food sovereignty and socio-cultural persistence.

Local Food Movement

A distinguished nature writer, ethnobotanist, agricultural ecologist, Gary Paul Nabhan is a pivotal name, promoting the preservation of the connections between biodiversity and cultural diversity. As a pioneer of the local food movement and the heirloom seed saving movement, Nabhan's interest in local food was first awakened by his longing for the fresh, delicious Lebanese foods his grandfather served before he left his home for college. For Nabhan, the health of communities is intricately related to conservation of the heirloom seeds, and thereby getting diverse and healthy food on the table. He criticizes losing touch with food production by stating, "More people than ever before in history have absolutely no involvement in producing the foods that sustain them (Nabhan, 2002, p. 26). To this end, he has been leading many research projects, coordinating farming alliances, and been a motivational speaker about the significance of "place-based" foods and dedicates himself to recover native food traditions in the American Southwest.

In his seminal work, *Where Our Food Comes From: Retracing Nikolay Vavilov's Quest to End Famine* (2008), Nabhan displays how significant it is to preserve heirloom seeds and its varieties in terms of protecting the natural vegetation and plant diversity for the survival of future generations. Tracing the efforts of Vavilov, an important Russian botanist, who creates the world's largest collection of plant and seed specimens in Leningrad and spends an extraordinary effort to protect them during the Nazi occupation in WWII, Nabhan studies the role of food heritage in the health of land, environment and communities. In the foreword to *Where Our Food Comes From*, K.B.Wilson addresses the shift from traditional agriculture to mass-produced food systems in a critical tone:

Where does our food come from? Much of humanity no longer knows how to put their hands into the soil, and instead specializes in curating, with microwaves, long-dead objects found in fridges. Rural people—let alone farmers—are treated as endangered species to be patronized at best. We no longer

have a way to learn from the fact that indigenous tribe X managed to feed themselves sustainably in a desert for several thousand years with only a few crises. Where is our science, we ask, when we hear that the world has destroyed a quarter of the irrigable land, lost thousands of tasty varieties of crops and livestock, and allowed farming economies and rural landscapes to break down? (Nabhan, 2009, p. xii)

Wilson's views on transformed food systems and vanished farming methods were also echoed by Nabhan in his early work, *Enduring Seeds: Native American Agriculture and Wild Plant Conservation* (1989), where he denounces the dispossession of Native American subsistence lands. Apart from the land seizure, Native American also experienced unfair management in their remaining territories as Nabhan notes, they "often found irrigation projects biased toward their non-Indian neighbors" (Nabhan, 1989, p. 61). These gradual yet systematic bias and discrimination in administration resulted in profound agricultural and ecological losses, including indigenous crop diversity: "Once their land and water were taken away, it is no wonder that Indian farming declined, and with it went much of the remaining native crop diversity" (Nabhan, 1989, p. 61). As mentioned, the erosion was inevitably multifaceted; affecting both cultural and culinary heritage.

Regarding his research on the North American Southwest, Paul E. Minnis writes on how this exploitative mindset changed food preferences in later periods, pointing to "a subtle shift in food preference patterns from the ancient past to the ethnographic present, largely because of the effects of Euro-Mexican-American occupation" (2004, p. 23). This relationship between land dispossession and disruption of local food systems is also examined by the Native American activist Winona LaDuke in her *All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life*, published in the same year with *Gardens*. LaDuke mentions how the indigenous food sovereignty was first dismantled by buffalo slaughter that provided a profitable venue for the Western cattle market (1999, p. 142). This systematic erasure policy, backed up later by Federal Indian Allotment policy was a severe impact on the "self-sufficiency" of Native communities (LaDuke, 1999, p. 149). Destroying "indigenous food sovereignty" functioned as a strong strategy to exempt them from "exercising collective self-determination" (Whyte, 2018, p. 363). As LaDuke conveys, "This relationship continues to this day" (1999, p. 142). Thus, the loss of Indian food systems comes forth as a critical effect of settler colonialism that also has its reflections on modern food culture today, relying on mass production and large-scale industrial farming.

Put differently, the disconnection from land due to systematic settler erasure not only precipitates the environmental degradation and exploitation of natural resources but also alter the way people produce and consume food. Considering the emergence of a new farmer/consumer model and loss of traditional knowledge in agriculture, Nabhan draws attention to the imminent threats to food supplies and the current decimation of genetic diversity in agriculture. As he critically warns, "agricultural biodiversity is the cornerstone for building greater food security for humankind; without it, our food system will be crippled by pestilence and plague, drought and flood, global warming, and the economic or environmental side effects of globalization" (Nabhan, 2009, p.15). Securing seed varieties is thus of vital importance for both human-caused and natural disasters for the critical role in the relief and recovery from the hazardous impacts in the aftermath of such disasters.

Enforcing a precautionary approach against these risk scenarios, Nabhan enforces a radical change in individual choices about their eating habits through a recent food trend that he pioneers: Local Food Movement. Basically speaking, Nabhan inspires people to reclaim local food consumption, either by growing their own food or eating locally grown foods close to the places of production. By emphasizing the inclusivity and ecological benefits of this initiative since it addresses to people from all segments of

society and foresees the restoration of American landscapes, Nabhan puts that, “Because of these efforts, the diversity of foods and beverages on American tables is greater than at any time in the last century. The number of cultivated food plant varieties in the US has more than doubled in the last thirty years, growing from 9,720 in the mid-1980s to 21,640 in the mid-2010s” (Nabhan, 2018, p. 2). The increase in edible plant species indicates how seemingly simple act of conscious food choice is indeed significant for preserving and restoring biodiversity.

At this point, Nabhan's framework aligns with the Indigenous food sovereignty movement, defined as “a method, getting to a place of decolonizing our diets, revitalizing our traditional food culture” (Hoover, 2019, p. 85). Echoing the earlier discussion on Nabhan's views on heirloom seeds as living archives of co-evolution that ensure food security and preserve cultural heritage, it is safe to state that the local food movement is a contemporary embodiment of this philosophy. Through localized foodsheds, Nabhan aims to reconnect not only with local food but also with the community around his Arizona home. As an effort to ensure the inclusivity of Indigenous communities in this movement, Nabhan jointly creates Native Seeds/SEARCH in 1983, in Tucson, Arizona. With this organization, sample seeds were distributed to many places, including “school gardens, tribal farms, indigenous agricultural interns, immigrant relief projects, and other public institutions in the area” (Nabhan, 2018, p. 155). This implies that his campaign offered more than raising an individual awareness, as it aimed a broader communal and environmental change. In this regard, he also conceptualizes a “fertile middle ground” to refer to a meeting ground (or “middle path”) for people from diverse groups to come together and take action for “biocultural restoration” (Nabhan, 2018, p. 17). Borrowing the term from Bill McDonald who used the “radical center” to define “a collaborative conversation movement” for the environmental activists in “resolving conflicts on food-producing lands in the American West,” Nabhan offers “consensus” as a more embracing and encompassing mode of action to restore food producing landscapes of the United States (2018, p. 27). Consequently, Nabhan envisions a long-term social process that people, regardless of their ideological beliefs, social status, or gender can engage in, just as Silko envisions in her *Gardens*. The relationship between Hattie, a privileged white woman and Indigo, a disadvantaged Indigenous child offers a microcosm of this “middle ground,” since their collaboration in collecting seeds empowers Indigo's community.

Accordingly, Silko's narrative represents how deeply the agrarian values and sustainable practices are rooted in food production for the Indigenous communities before they were replaced by the industrial farming techniques, changing the production and consumption patterns completely. As the existing scholarship suggests, their systematic erasure has affected the diet of people of the world. In this context, Yeonhaun Kang writes how Silko “offers a new account of Native modernity—one that is crucial to both the reconfiguration of American Indians' savage image and the revitalization of indigenous food systems for the survival of tribal people and their biocultural diversity in the region” (2016, p. 39). Although Silko's account is based on a fictional territory, the places she mentions maps onto the North American Southwest where “a legacy of agricultural lifeways stretching back more than three millennia” for Native Americans (Fish, 2004, p. 117). Thus, Indigo's act of collecting seeds is not only a step towards reviving a historical Southwestern agriculture tradition but also places her as the literary anticipation of the frameworks Nabhan proposes for the local food movement. Although Indigo's journey was examined as a literary trope of resistance by Hunziker (2026) and Kang (2016), this study is grounded in the historical roots of ethnobotany in the Southwest, documented by Gary Paul Nabhan. It is seen that a fictional action can appear as a historically confirmed survival method. Both Silko and Nabhan voice similar concerns in their narratives and they both offer similar solutions, whether directly or indirectly, to secure healthy and diversified foods for her future generations. At this point, reading these two

authors together enables to examine Indigo as a radical figure who reclaims those lost agrarian values and revitalize the food systems in her native land.

Indigo as an Indigenous Food Sovereignty Pioneer

As discussed above, the Indigenous people were the worst adversely affected group of the settler colonialism due to the extensive destruction they experienced, in terms of losing their traditional food systems, sovereignty, and self-determination. Further to this, the clash between the European and Native Americans is one of the most frequently treated themes in American literature which contributes not only to the perpetuation of division among people but also stereotyped beliefs about Indigenous people. To challenge those stereotypes, Silko offers an alternative literary work based on a holistic connection with all living beings, regardless of geopolitical or species-specific approaches, as she suggests: “We can be our best selves as a species, as beings with all the other living beings on this earth, we behave best and get along best, without those divisions” (Arnold, 1998, pp. 9-10). However, this does not imply that Silko's conciliatory tone is to hide historically evidenced violence toward the Native American people.

Gardens incorporates a great deal of events that recall the occurrences, happened during the removal of American Indian tribes in North America with the arrival of the European colonists. Like other tribes settling in South California, the Sand Lizard people were not only reduced in number but also, they suffered from the disease and starvation after the invasion of their lands. The book starts with the raid of the Ghost Dance ceremony and the capture of Indian Americans, including Indigo's mother. Their displacement from their ancestral lands and the girls' involuntary relocation to different places afterwards reflect both the politics of forced removal and agricultural dispossession. In this vein, the vivid portrayal of Grandma Fleet's efforts to teach her grandchildren about the agricultural traditions through practice points to Indigenous food sovereignty and its broader implications for the Native American people. Her meticulous care toward food crops and her emphasis on reciprocal relationship between humans and nature illustrate their egalitarian and holistic approach:

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 greet each plant respectfully. . . . Sand Lizard warned her children to share: Don't be greedy. 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. (Silko, 1999, pp. 14-15)

The Sand Lizard people have been tending the old gardens for ages and it seems that the gardens also serve as a space for passing down the traditional knowledge and comprehending the interconnectedness with nature. As the excerpt suggests, all human and nonhuman kin should have their share of the grown food according to Native American cosmology. Moreover, for Grandma Fleet, seeds are “treasure” (Silko, 1999, p. 19). She keeps them in the storage basket made by her own hands and glass containers with lids, in her bedding, for “safekeeping” (Silko, 1999, p. 22). In another example where she treats the apricot pits, is notable: “Mmmm! You will be my little sweethearts, my little apricot trees!” (Silko, 1999, p. 22) Here, Grandma Fleet's encompassing affection towards seeds has its reflections on Nabhan's ideas on seeds, who places “the enduring seeds” in the category of “the remaining riches of the living world” (Nabhan, 2018, p. 2).⁵ Her act of collecting seeds from food scraps by “pok[ing] her stick through the

⁵ Although Nabhan's definition of “enduring seeds” is to refer to seed varieties preserved by traditional agricultural communities, Grandma Fleet's seeds can also be treated under this category.

debris in garbage piles behind the cafe and hotel” is critical for illustrating the significance of seeds for sustainability and survival for her community (Silko, 1999, p. 22). On the other hand, her awareness runs parallel to Nabhan’s focus on the worth of seeds for collective survival, as he provides an example of Rollen Chalmers, the African American farmer who grows Carolina Gold and Charleston rice in Georgia with the seeds supplied by the Carolina Gold Rice Foundation. Chalmer explains its criticality for him by stating, “My grandfather grew his Gold rice for survival, my family depended on it” (qtd. in Nabhan, 2018, p. 116). In this regard, Chalmer’s donating the seeds of his first harvest back to the foundation and Grandma Fleet’s keeping seeds for future represent a recurrent survival practice, appear across different communities, whose histories were shaped by dispossession.

After Grandma Fleet’s death, while Indigo is captured and sent to a boarding school in Riverside, California, Sister Salt is taken to a reservation at Parker to remain under the custody of Indian agency. Running away from the school, Indigo comes across a newly married couple and is taken in by Hattie Abbott Palmer, a scholar of early Christian history and her husband, Edward Palmer, a scholar, botanist and explorer who has devoted himself to find a new plant species that would bear his name. Thereafter, the narrative focus shifts into Indigo’s self-initiated role for her community as the seed collector after the Palmers decide to take Indigo to their long journey through New England, England, Italy and France. Their tour involves visiting the grand homes and splendid gardens of their wealthy friends and relatives. As soon as their journey starts, it appears that Granma Fleet’s consciousness about protecting heritage of food, culture and tradition is passed down to Indigo. She remembers her grandmother

always advised the girls to collect as many new seeds as they could carry home. The more strange and unknown the plant, the more interested Grandma Fleet was; she loved to collect and trade seeds. Others did not grow a plant unless it was food or medicine, but Sand Lizards planted seeds to see what would come; Sand Lizards ate nearly everything anyway, and Grandma said they never found a plant they couldn’t use for some purpose. (Silko, 1999, p. 83)

Indigo’s preserving and translating Grandma Fleet’s wisdom into action symbolizes both her loyalty to her community and places her as the representative of the local food movement. Throughout her journey across the ocean, Indigo collects seeds to plant back in the gardens of her hometown. Moreover, Grandma Fleet’s advice on adopting an unbiased approach toward seeds proves the existence of a community-sustaining model based on “subsistence farming,” a practice Ryan characterizes it as “essential to the Indians’ survival” (2007, p. 120).

In this vein, *Gardens* features how the abduction of their land by the US government’s Indian removal policy disrupts the Sand Lizards’ foodways. When farming on their ancestral lands is banned, hunger and despair drive people to eat birds, mesquite beans or on the seeds that pack rats store. Regrettably, at a certain point, “there were no pack rats left to gather and store seeds” in the old gardens (Silko, 1999, p. 47). In this sense, the novel recontextualizes devastating repercussions of the conquests of Native lands, by highlighting the destruction on Indigenous farming traditions and sustainable food systems. During their visit to Hattie’s aunt’s gardens in England, Aunt Bronwyn reminds Indigo of the great contribution of Indigenous people to global dietary exchange stating, “the American Indians, gave the world so many vegetables, fruits, and flowers—corn, tomatoes, potatoes, chilies, peanuts, coffee, chocolate, pineapple, bananas, and of course, tobacco” (Silko, 1999, p. 244). Indigo starts to draw and take notes of plants she sees on the notebook Aunt Bronwyn has given her as a gift with the diverse seeds from her garden.

Indigo’s instinctive approach toward gathering seeds starts in Edward’s sister, Susan James’s Garden in Oyster Bay, New York where Indigo “pick[s] up seeds and save[s] them in scraps of paper with her

nightgown and clothes in the valise so she could grow them when she went home” while she carefully listens Edward and Susan’s conversation on flowers and plants (Silko, 1999, p. 185). Her close attention to new information and dream of planting the seeds back in her own land parallels to Nabhan’s own practice of local food, cultivating a land around Patagonia, Arizona: “It was a practice that had a two-to three-thousand-year-old legacy in this landscape, and we were simply playing a small role in collectively keeping that legacy alive” (Nabhan, 2018, p. 6). Thus, Indigo’s attempt equals to a defiance of colonialist attitude and revival of the legacy of native foodways. Moreover, Nabhan’s emphasis on the importance of place-based knowledge in restoring Indigenous farming practices echoes itself in Indigo’s thinking of planting these seeds in suitable locations. For instance, in Aunt Bronwyn’s gardens, “[s]he knew just the place to plant these sunflowers, not far from the spring above the dunes” (Silko, 1999, p. 244). The scene shows both the transmission of ancestral information to Indigo and her reclaiming these lost seed traditions. The Italian scholar Laura’s sharing seeds with Indigo from her garden near Lucca, Italy aligns with Nabhan’s advocacy for collaboration to rebuild Native American food sovereignty.

At this point, Indigo’s pursuit through the gardens echoes the Russian botanist Nikolai Vavilov’s endeavors during the interwar period. Nabhan elaborates Vavilov’s journey across the globe collecting and storing seeds while revolutionary changes take place in Russia. He travels to five continents to collect specimens of wild plant species due to their potential use for the food security of his nation. The seeds were to be stored in a government protected institution. Following the footsteps of Vavilov, Nabhan revisits some of the places Vavilov has gone and realizes the vanishing seed diversity in the US. As he conveys, “FAO [Food and Agricultural Organization] estimates that about threequarters of the genetic diversity of agricultural crops has been lost over the last century” (Nabhan, 2009, pp. 24-25). Native Seeds/SEARCH organization emerges as a part of Nabhan’s dedication to preserve the diversified heirloom seeds in danger of extinction. In this context, Nabhan tangibly achieves a similar vision, Silko implicitly weaves in her novel. Returning to Vavilov and Indigo’s parallelism, it is important to note that while they both engage in a kind of rescue mission for their people through their journeys across the continents, Vavilov’s program was a government sponsored activity. As the literary antithesis of Vavilov, Indigo, recognizing the crucial importance of seeds to feed her people, carries them for restoring her native lands and vanishing foodways.

Therefore, Indigo’s encounter with Hattie and their transatlantic journey together offer both reconciliation among the (un)indigenous people of America and enable Indigo to become a vehicle of ensuring food security for her future generations. Through her careful and attentive observation, she reclaims the sustainability in native food practices and the sacred connection with land. Upon her realization that Edward used them (Hattie and Indigo) as “dupes” and “decoys” in his search for citrus cuttings (for making candied citron, a hybrid plant) throughout their journey, Hattie separates from Edward and decides to take Indigo to her family (Silko, 1999, p. 329). Once she returns to home, Indigo starts to plant flower and vegetable seeds she has been saving beginning from the land of other Indians like the Chemehuevi sisters at the Road’s End (in the reservation area). Although sisters are initially reluctant to use the scarce water for the seeds from Indigo’s collection they later become content with what they see: “Big spikes of buds appeared in the first warm days after Christmas, and in no time white, lavender, red, and yellow flowers opened. People passing by on the road stopped to stare—the flowers were quite a sight” (Silko, 1999, p. 475).

Besides, Indigo’s dinner table shows her promising future as a pioneer of local producer and consumer in gardens in the dunes. The vegetable stew they serve to the Chemehuevi sisters along with “red amaranth tortillas. . . made earlier that day” dazzle them with the delicious natural taste (Silko, 1999, p.

473). When Indigo asks the sisters if they recognize the ingredient in the stew, they think that it is “some kind of potato” before they notice that it is “a gladiolus spud” (Silko, 1999, p. 475). Indigo makes use of hybridized gladiolus not just for its aesthetically pleasing quality but also its value as food. According to Kang, the dining scene has important connotations:

On the one hand, it materially suggests that traveling knowledge, signaled by the hybridized gladiolus, helps indigenous people rebuild their Indian farming system, even if the resources such as water and good land are not sufficient due to white settlers' colonization of the American West. On the other hand, it symbolically foretells the future of Native arts and cultures that reconciles aesthetics with politics by creatively synthesizing indigenous artistic aspirations and practical needs. (2016, p. 65)

In line with Kang's perspective, Indigo's hybridized gladiolus serves not only as a symbol of physical survival but also a resilience against settler colonialism. The emphasis on the usefulness of Indigo's traveling knowledge also exemplifies the potential results of Nabhan's call for the joint effort for renewing food traditions. She preserves the capacity of her community to use their native lands for food sovereignty.

Conclusion

The settler imperialism and the Westward Expansion had profound consequences for the Indigenous communities in terms of land dispossession and their foodways. Silko's fictionalization of the legacy of imperialism through *Gardens* not only recontextualized the cost of imperial destruction but also provoked a critical reflection on history. Moreover, in the light of contemporary food sovereignty movement discussions, the erasure of traditional ecological knowledge has caused modern food systems to fall under corporate control. Within this context, through his collaboration efforts and community-based initiatives to revitalize Indigenous agricultural sovereignty, Gary Paul Nabhan offered great parallelisms to what Silko imagined nearly a decade ago. Indigo, the protagonist is a literary prefiguration of the potential pioneering agents Nabhan elaborates in his works, particularly in his *Enduring Seeds*, *Food from the Radical Center*, and *Where Our Food Comes from*. Much like Nabhan expects people to be a part of the local food movement to contribute to biocultural restoration, Indigo collected seeds throughout her journeys and planted them in her garden, not just to ensure the food security of her community but also to recover her ancestral practices.

From a broader perspective, her return with a collection of seeds and “traveling knowledge” also serve as a move toward reclaiming heritage lands and asserting self-determination over Indigenous lives. In a way, Indigo bridges the gap to repair the broken bond of indigenous people with nature/land due to European expansion in their land. Considering the current scholarship on food sovereignty, she emerges as a progressive figure whose relevance endures. Furthermore, her attempt may not end in success if it was not the help of Hattie, a white member of society. Therefore, it is safe to assume that using this social issue of divisions in society as an entry point like Nabhan, Silko discusses the larger issue of food systems through envisaging the possibility of collaboration between first people and settler societies of America. The optimistic tone in Silko's writing not only promises a restoration of America's food-producing capacity but also offers a transformative approach to reimagine the ways to preserve and share Indigenous knowledge.

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