

EXILE, DIASPORA, AND SOVEREIGNTY: RETHINKING THE MEDIEVAL CANON ON INDIGENOUS LANDS

BY SUZANNE CONKLIN AKBARI

Abstract: Attentiveness to the land we live and work on requires that we resituate our relationships to monuments of literary history, and to one another. Drawing upon the words—and the artwork—of Lenape Delaware scholar and activist Joanne Barker, this article focuses on two recent handbooks, *The Oxford Handbook of Dante* (2021) and *The Oxford Handbook of Chaucer* (2020). The tension of individual and community, exile and diaspora, solitariness and relationality, found in Dante looks very different when viewed in light of work created by Indigenous writers and artists, and to the view of relationality, responsibility, and situatedness expressed through it.

If we are to continue to read canonical writers of the so-called Western tradition today, in the twenty-first century, what ground do we read them on? My question is not “Should we read them,” but rather “*How* do we read them?” This question is motivated not only by my own long-standing interest in the processes of canon formation and anthology writing, which I have both studied and participated in as a teacher and editor, but also by the urgent need to take stock of the operation of the Western canon in the political sphere. This is starkly illustrated by the presence of that phrase in state-level legislation on educational guidelines, such as Florida SB 266: this law states that college and university courses

may not distort significant historical events or include a curriculum that teaches identity politics . . . or is based on theories that systemic racism, sexism, oppression, and privilege are inherent in the institutions of the United States and were created to maintain social, political, and economic inequities. . . . Humanities courses must afford students the ability to think critically through the mastering of subjects concerned with human culture, especially literature, history, art, music, and philosophy, and must include selections from the Western canon.¹

This emphasis on the Western canon is also evident in the reinvention of New College of Florida, a public liberal arts college in

Sarasota, on the model of Hillsdale College, a Christian liberal arts college in Michigan that celebrates “Great Books” and prepares its graduates to offer K-12 education centered on “Reviving the American Tradition” through charter schools supported by state funds.² As Florida Education Commissioner Manny Diaz put it in January 2023, “New College of Florida will become Florida’s classical college, more along the lines of a Hillsdale of the South.”³ His words were echoed by Governor Ron DeSantis: “It’s now been a new mission of being a classical liberal arts college. So we’re going to be like a little Hillsdale maybe down in Florida. Can you imagine how good that would be?”⁴

The reinvention of New College of Florida has proven to be a bellwether for changes currently underway at the state flagship University of Florida, where the restrictions on what may *not* be taught (embedded in SB 266) are accompanied by a renewed emphasis on what *should* be taught: that is, “classical” learning conveyed through the “Western canon.” This curriculum is delivered through a new entity, the Hamilton Center at the University of Florida, established in 2022 by a three-million-dollar unrequested endowment provided by the state legislature.⁵ In the words of the Hamilton Center’s mission statement, its role is

developing integrated, multidisciplinary undergraduate curriculum focusing on the Western intellectual tradition and the ideals of the American founding. This curriculum will educate students in the core texts and great debates of Western civilization and in the principles, ideals and institutions of the American political order.⁶

(They also plan on “assisting the Florida Department of Education in its implementation of Florida’s K-12 civics curriculum.”⁷) The Hamilton Center’s course list for Spring 2023 includes Dante Alighieri’s *Purgatorio*, followed by Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, and Homer’s *Odyssey*; Fall 2023 features Augustine’s *Confessions*, Plato’s *Republic*, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Faust*, and John Donne’s *Songs and Sonnets*.⁸ This is what is often described as a “Great Books” curriculum, explicitly placing “Western civilization” in the service of “the American political order.”

I have taught every single one of those texts, usually in the context of a survey of literary history, from my earliest experience as a teacher of “Literature Humanities” at Columbia University through the development of a large lecture course on “The

Literary Tradition” at the University of Toronto.⁹ While teaching that course, I was also serving as an editor of the *Norton Anthology of World Literature*, responsible for Volume B (covering the years 100–1500), and soon after the course ended, I began to co-host a literature podcast called *The Spouter-Inn* with Chris Piuma.¹⁰ In all of these settings, the emphasis was on placing these so-called “Great Books” within the larger framework of literary history, and making sure to teach these books against the grain: not as authoritative sources of wisdom, but as books that were in a conversation with one another, and with us. It used to seem like this would be enough, but those of us who teach or carry out research on the literature of medieval Europe are now confronted with an unavoidable, sobering question: if we choose to continue to focus on Dante or Geoffrey Chaucer—or any canonical writer—how do we do so without being complicit in what Florida SB 266 describes as the “mastery” of the “Western canon,” understood as the fundamental expression of “human culture”? Do we (for example) read Dante or Chaucer as Christian readers, understanding ourselves within a confessional continuity that links past and present? Do we read philologically, as readers of Italian or of English, where that imagined continuity is at the level of language and its development over time, including its relationship to other tongues such as French or Latin? Do we read in terms of poetics or philosophy, each time inscribing ourselves within an imagined genealogy of intellectual history and the arts?

In the following pages, I will suggest that attentiveness to the land we live and work on provides a way to resituate our relationships to these books, and to one another. What happens if, instead of beginning with the author, or the work, we instead begin with where we ourselves stand? Doing so brings a very different perspective to our reading of Dante, or of Chaucer, or of any canonical author. It also produces a contingent, local reading, which is particularly evident whenever I have shared this argument in oral form: the way I address this material has looked very different depending upon whether I was speaking in Princeton, or Irvine, or Chicago, or Berlin. In each place, I began by giving an account of my own situated knowledge, as well as the layers of history and the ongoing social and political realities that govern the place where I live and work, as well as the place where I was speaking. These places, these situations, shape both my individual and our collective experience. None of us sees from a purely detached perspective:

we are abstracted neither from the conditions of our own experience, nor from the layered histories of the places where we live and work.¹¹ In taking this approach, I am guided by the words of Delaware scholar and activist Joanne Barker, who describes how she is accountable not only to Lunaapahkiing (Lenapehoking), the territory of her ancestors, and to the lands in Oklahoma where her tribal nation (Delaware Tribe) is based today, but also to the Chochenyo Ohlone territory in northern California where Barker herself lives and works: “I claim and am claimed by Lenapehoking. But neither Lenapehoking, Oklahoma, nor Oakland are ‘my land.’ These lands define my relationships and responsibilities. They define my scholarship, activism, fiction, and artwork. They define me.”¹² The methodology I am proposing also draws upon the work of Greg Curnoe, a Canadian painter who in 1990 began to investigate the legal history of the lot (38 Weston Street, sub-lot 7) he lived on in London, Ontario. In the Editor’s Note to Curnoe’s posthumously published *Deeds / Abstracts*, Frank Davey writes that Curnoe came to wonder “How had it become possible in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to ‘own’ land that had for thousands of years been First Nations corn fields and hunting grounds?”¹³ As time went by, the “First Nations” appendix of the project gradually became the main focus of Curnoe’s research, becoming “a 250-page listing and short biography of virtually every First Nations person whom Curnoe could identify as having lived in the lower Great Lakes region between 1700 and 1850.”¹⁴ Curnoe understood that his responsibilities flowed from the land and the people connected with it, and would be manifested in both his historical research and his artwork.

Attentiveness to land, to our local situatedness and the responsibilities that flow from it, can enable us to rethink literary history by means of understanding story—as it underlies both history and literature—in a different way. I will ground this argument by focusing on two recent handbooks, describing their purpose and giving an account of how they work: *The Oxford Handbook of Dante* (2021) and *The Oxford Handbook of Chaucer* (2020). These two are different in many ways, but they share the task of presenting a canonical author of the Middle Ages who sits at the head of a literary tradition to readers of the twenty-first century. A closer look at one particular section of the *Dante Handbook*—the fourth section, on “Space(s) and Places”—reveals how the theme of exile, so fundamental to Dante and to the literary patrimony that followed him,

from Francis Petrarch to Erich Auerbach to Edward Said, informs our reading. What are the implications of an authorship—and an authority—forged within the crucible of exile? What are its spatial implications, and how does it relate to both diaspora and pilgrimage? Is the solitary self at the center, or is the community? And how does this identity forged in exile serve as a template for identity more generally, through the canonization of the *Commedia*, its reception and influence over time, and the perception of it as a “universal” text?

One way of approaching this dynamic is in keeping with the global turn in historical studies, as well as regional approaches that emphasize entanglement and connectivity, such as Mediterranean Studies.¹⁵ What I am proposing here, however, is something else: the tension of individual and community, exile and diaspora, solitariness and relationality, that we find in Dante looks very different when we place it in the light of the work created by Indigenous writers and artists, and to the view of relationality, responsibility, and situatedness expressed through it. In taking this approach, it is important to be wary of the danger of being extractive: that is, understanding the work of Indigenous writers and the field of Indigenous Studies as simply yet another fashionable turn within literary studies. On the contrary, this approach requires us to slow down and consider how the very assumptions of our disciplines are disrupted by this encounter, and by reckoning with the histories of the land we live and work on, as well as the imperial and colonial histories of the disciplines we inhabit.

I. THE TEMPORALITY OF HANDBOOKS AND THE GLOBAL TURN

The Oxford Handbook of Dante is rich and varied, with a wide range of perspectives. The contributors include both senior scholars and early career researchers, based in several European countries plus North America. The introduction makes it clear that the editors aimed to bring out the “plurality of interpretation” that exists potentially in the writings of Dante, drawing on a wide range of disciplinary fields and academic formations.¹⁶ This plurality is complemented by the vulnerability that the editors also sought to convey, invoked in the introduction’s title: “Dante Unbound: A Vulnerable Life and the Openness of Interpretation” (*D*, xxiii–xxxv). The editors offer a vision of the poet that is expressed through the sense of woundedness that permeates his writings,

a Dante that is open and variable rather than closed down and monolithic. The structure of the volume manifests this orientation toward openness and variability, in part through the trajectory of the sequence of seven sections; these contribute to a teleological effect, where we begin with origins and end by gesturing beyond the present moment of the reader. We start with the author and his works, including both the poetic text itself and the materiality of its manuscripts, as well as the digital forms of Dante's text that have become ubiquitous. Then, intertextuality: Dante's works appear in dialogue with Virgil and Ovid, the *Roman de la Rose*, Occitan and Italian lyric, and more. In the third section, the interplay of Latin and the vernacular is at the center, with a focus on several major fields of intellectual history—medicine, optics, law, political theory, philosophy and theology—and their refraction in Dante's Latin and Italian works. Then, "Space[s] and Places," opening out from the intimacy of Florence itself to encompass the tense relationship with Rome (and every other city seen in counterpoint to Dante's own home), and then finally to extend out into the wider world, in increasingly expansive circles—the Mediterranean, "the East," and ultimately the other worlds that lie beyond the borders of this one.

The fifth section is comprised of a tightly focused set of essays on desire and the passions of the body, including their transmutation into the soul's mystic longing for union with the divine. Then, with "A Non-Linear Dante," the volume offers an explicit exploration of the "vulnerable" and open poet evoked in the introduction—essays that reveal contradiction, paradox, and even error to be fundamental features of the work. The *Handbook* closes with "Nachleben," surveying translations and adaptations, in text, on stage, and on the screen, before turning to the reception of Dante's writings in the wider world. The potential of this approach is evident in Jason Allen-Paisant's powerful essay on responses to Dante by two Afro-Caribbean writers, Kamau Brathwaite and Lorna Goodison. As he puts it, these writers "help us to interrogate Dante's work in relation to parts of the world far removed from Dante's Europe, and yet entangled with the modern Europe in which Dante is enshrined as a monument of the humanist tradition" (*D*, 684). Allen-Paisant's essay invites us to look beyond the borders of the European and North American mainstream of Dante Studies, gesturing toward the persistently generative quality of the medieval poet even in the face of the burdensome monumentality of the canon. The volume ends with an essay by Marguerite Waller that aims to provide a

“decolonial” reading of Dante, uniting early medieval Church practices with contemporary Latin American feminist theory. In sum, the overall trajectory of the *Oxford Handbook to Dante* moves outward from the text itself (in section 1) until, in the last section, it reaches the fullest development of Dante’s impact. This expansion is expressed in terms of space, with the wider geographical scope of the closing essays, both the Caribbean poetics in Allen-Paisant’s essay and the Latin American theorists of Waller’s. This expansion is also expressed in terms of time, as the *Handbook* moves from sections that explicitly contextualize Dante in his own historical moment to those that encourage generative readings, producing new creations and inventions, both poetic and philosophical, that could not have been foreseen by Dante himself.

My comments on the structure of this *Handbook* are based not only on my reading of it, but also on my experience of co-editing (with James Simpson) another book in this same series, the *Oxford Handbook to Chaucer*. The two are different in many ways, yet they share the task of dealing with a canonical writer who is fundamental to a national philology and a national literature. Unsurprisingly, the structure of the two volumes is similar, owing to the conventions of the handbook genre.¹⁷ Both begin with an opening section that addresses the author, his manuscripts, and his own historical moment; both go on to a section on the intertextual relationships of the work, the Latin, French, and Italian traditions (for both Dante and Chaucer), plus Hebrew and Arabic. The third section in the Dante *Handbook*, on the major fields of intellectual history and the intersection of learned Latin and the vernacular, corresponds to sections four and five in the Chaucer *Handbook*, which focus on medicine, philosophy, theology, law, and mathematics. And “Afterlife,” clearly, is not too far away from “Nachleben.”

In writing the introduction to the Chaucer *Handbook*, I surveyed a number of other books in the genre from the past few decades and noticed something striking about their treatment of temporality: these handbooks “seek at once to place Chaucer in his own historical moment and, in some sense, to place him in our current moment. . . . Chaucer’s work is both seen as fundamental to a national, English literary history, and described as universal, almost ‘modern’ in its attentiveness to . . . the interior life of the individual subject” (*D*, 1). This apparent ability to transcend time, to be at once situated in the fourteenth century and in a fully modern moment, is the basis of the claim to “universality,”

and to status within the literary canon. It also makes an implicit claim of timelessness for English literary history itself. This fully (even perennially) modern moment, however, is not the reader's present moment:

These closing moves do not consist of an effort to link Chaucer's time with our own time, but rather to link the medieval past with some projected future moment: that is, not the now, but what lies ahead of the now. What is suggested by this move is the notion that Chaucer is relevant not just to our own time, but to some potential future time—or, even, relevant to all times, including a range of moments that both extend back into the past and onward into the future. What's suggested is that the end date, the expiration date of Chaucer's relevance, always lies ahead of where we are.¹⁸

Is the implicit temporality of Dante, as manifested in the 2021 *Handbook* briefly described above, embedded in a similar teleology? Yes, in that the monumentality of canonicity always demands this kind of teleology, the promise of perennial relevance and the reiterated shock of novelty with each successive generation of readers. No, in that the implicit temporality of Dante is specifically recursive or cyclical in a way that Chaucer is not. This recursive or cyclical quality emerges, I would suggest, from the formal qualities of Dante's poetry—above all the *Commedia*—where the highly polished form contrasts strongly with the open-ended fecundity of the *Canterbury Tales*. Observances of significant anniversaries, as with the 700th anniversary of Dante's death in 2021, reify the heavy weight of monumentality built into the canon. This in turn leaves twenty-first-century readers in the position of re-evaluating the place of Dante, as of other canonical writers, in our classrooms, on our syllabi, and in our anthologies.

“Our classrooms,” “our syllabi,” “our anthologies”—who is this “we”? This is a question I have felt with particular urgency at certain moments when teaching Dante—perhaps most acutely when teaching canto 28 of the *Inferno*, which depicts the grotesque torments of Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, and his companion Ali. This experience is uncomfortable in one way when teaching a class that includes Muslim students, who are pained and—even when well prepared for the reading—deeply offended by what they are reading. The experience is uncomfortable in another way when teaching a class that has no Muslim students, and where the scene of Muhammad's torment is seen as simply another episode

of the divine justice that rules Hell. It is uncomfortable because I am offended, and there is no obvious way to talk about that offense.¹⁹ In her brief yet insightful article on the usage of the term “Saracen,” Shokoofeh Rajabzadeh draws our attention to the disparate effect of hateful language or malignant depictions of Muslims in premodern literature: “Who I am shapes my canon. It determines what I read, why I read, how I read, and what I experience while reading. And yet, scholars’ fears of anachronism, their desires to protect objects of study yield criticism that welcomes me only as an academic, not as a Muslim.”²⁰ In other words, canon formation is always intimately connected with the construction of the “we” evoked in our handbooks and anthologies. Rajabzadeh goes on to draw our attention, painfully and persistently, to this variable “we”:

Who are we writing for, who are we speaking to, when we reuse the term Saracen in our scholarship? What are we protecting? Because when we interpret literary material that uses the Saracen label and choose Saracen over Muslim we are not writing for Muslims or considering their experience of the material. I never read literary work from the Middle Ages and see or hear or perceive a Saracen. I read this work and recognize a version of myself that is monstrosized and misrepresented. It can often leave me feeling ashamed and humiliated. It will always leave me feeling powerless.²¹

This shame and humiliation, this sense of feeling powerless, is another kind of vulnerability—another kind of wound—that we would do well to be attentive to in our readings of Dante, and in the collective self (the “we”) that is generated in the formation and maintenance of our literary canons.

II. EXILE, DIASPORA, AND THE “INDIGENOUS TURN”

Canonical authors are those who are seen—or, better, are represented—as embodying some universal quality, or inhabiting some universal perspective. For Chaucer, this plays out in terms of national identity and the claim of modernity:

Chaucer—again like Shakespeare—plays a peculiar role in the stories we tell ourselves about English literary history. In survey courses, and in departmental hiring patterns, Chaucer is consistently positioned as the medieval writer, as Shakespeare is for the Renaissance. This is not the place to go into the long history of

how the “medieval” was invented, and especially the ways in which Chaucer specifically was identified, in Spenser’s words, as ‘the well of English undefiled’; it is impossible to ignore, however, the extent to which the fantasy of a pure (“undefiled”) language serves the ends of an emergent sense of national identity, from Spenser’s time through the emergence of English as a field of study in the nineteenth century. The national philology underlying this view of Chaucer can also be compared with the role of Dante—and the Florentine vernacular—in the self-fashioning of Italian national identity, especially as it was developed in the nineteenth century. The history of the discipline of English is inseparable from the invention of Chaucer as a figure who can be at once localized to the medieval past and also generalized as a man for all times, whose premodern nature aligns seamlessly with an endlessly renewable “modern” quality.²²

The move to universalize Chaucer as a “man for all times” also informs our view of Dante. In some ways, their canonicity is very similar; in other ways, different. Perhaps the most striking difference between the way these two poets are seen pertains to the condition of exile, which is repeatedly associated with Dante and which has informed his reception by a wide range of writers, from Petrarch to Auerbach and Said.²³

Exile is a political state that, in Dante’s writing, is also a spiritual state. In the course of the *Commedia*, the narrator undergoes a gradual shift from the exile of this world—which a political condition specifically related to the city of Florence—to the exile that is this world, which is a state of spiritual privation that bars the soul from the city of God. Significantly, exile is an individual experience, and in this respect is starkly different from the collective experience of diaspora. The individual experience of exile produces, precisely, the individual: the subject who comes to know himself through the experience of being cast out, at home everywhere because he is at home nowhere. The exiled self is the true cosmopolitan subject. This is fundamentally different from diaspora, which (from the time of the term’s usage by Josephus in the first century) is explicitly the forced exile of a people or a nation—originally and paradigmatically the Jewish people, cast out from Jerusalem in repeated cycles of dispersal. Diaspora has become a template, however, to talk about the forced dispersal of other peoples, most famously the Black Atlantic diaspora as formulated by Paul Gilroy, and many others as well. The field of Diaspora Studies explicitly uses this paradigm to characterize

the enforced or constrained movement of peoples outward from their original homelands, and the complex web of relationships that connects those in the diaspora with those who remain.²⁴ The political dimensions of the language of diaspora are complex: to give just one example, the term “Lenape diaspora” is used by one of the nations officially recognized by the American government, the Delaware Tribe of Oklahoma, to describe their place in the world. Following their example, the term has come to be widely used by institutions in their official land acknowledgements, guided by the Lenape Center in Manhattan.²⁵ For the Delaware Tribe, the language of diaspora provides a way to express a temporal relationship with their original territory, to predict a future moment when the people will return to the place they came from. This is a very particular way of conceiving of tribal sovereignty, one that is ultimately derived from an explicitly theological notion of political sovereignty that has deep roots in the late antique and medieval past, and a specifically Christian understanding of Jewish history.²⁶

Dante’s state of exile, however, is not a state of diaspora: his experience of exile is singular and not collective. The solitude of his political exile is movingly described in the encounter with his ancestor Cacciaguیدا, where Dante is told how painful it will be to exist as an exile, climbing the stairs in another man’s house, eating the bread served at another man’s table.²⁷ Simultaneously, however, as the text progresses and the shift from the literal, political exile from Florence is metamorphosed into the metaphorical, spiritual exile from the heavenly city, the focus on identity gives way to a focus on community. Or at least some readings of Dante proceed this way, making room for an ethics of relationality within the *Commedia*, grounded on the pivotal moment in *Purgatorio*, canto 2, when Dante hears the souls singing the biblical Psalm “In exitu Israel de Aegypto.” The song evokes the collective experience of the souls moving through Purgatory, out of bondage and, ultimately, to the spiritual Promised Land. These are the chosen people of Christ, who are understood within the Pauline supersessionist hermeneutic to be the fulfillment and the replacement of the original chosen people of Israel. They are placed in stark contrast to the Jews of the post-Incarnation period, who are condemned to wander eternally in a state of diaspora. Diaspora is thus the mirror image of the delivery from bondage in Egypt, and of pilgrimage itself. Far from being a movement back toward the sacred center, it is a dispersal to the periphery.

Dante's status as an exile is consistently seen as fundamental to his character as it is developed in the *Commedia*, and the way in which he is presented within literary history. As the introduction to the Dante *Handbook* puts it, "Exile is, for Dante, a tragic yet foundational experience" (*D*, xxv). A wide range of writers, beginning with Petrarch and extending as far as Auerbach and Said, evoke Dante as a figure of exile that can serve as a model for the experience of others. The state of exile is understood as at once depriving the subject of the comforts and safety of home, and also giving him a place to speak from that is also separate, apart from any shared community. To be an exile is to be special, in the sense of epitomizing the species, standing out as the individual form which is the exemplar of all others.

Dante's authorship, and his authority, is grounded on this state of exile. Johannes Bartuschat, in his essay ("Exile") that appears in part 4 of the Dante *Handbook*, describes the function of exile as foundational not only for the man, but for "civilization" itself:

Exile is the foundation for Dante's mission, as well as for his dignity. The encounter with Cacciaguida takes the form of an investiture, both chivalric and prophetic. Dante becomes, like his ancestor, a combatant for Faith and a prophet who must spread the truth and awaken consciences. At the same time, through the reference to Anchises, Dante compares himself with another exile, Aeneas, who as a *profugus*, a man who has lost his homeland, rebuilds civilization. (*D*, 408)

Bartuschat goes on to add:

Poetry from the standpoint of the exile no longer has the reintegration of the individual as its supreme goal, but the restoration of the human city. Dante's mission, in his capacity as an exile, is to rebuild civilization through the moral force of his poetic word. The ties between Dante and the city of Florence remain a living reality, crucial to the identity of the poet. It is only this productive dialectic between detachment and nostalgia which allows exile to constitute the foundation upon which Dante can found his new conception of poetry and authorship. (*D*, 414)

In this formulation, the status of exile is not merely the guarantor of Dante's own authority: it is the basis for "civilization," positioning the diasporic figure of Aeneas as Dante's predecessor. Fleeing from the ruins of Troy, Aeneas founds Rome; fleeing from Florence and,

more broadly, from the corruption of this temporal world, Dante establishes “a new conception of poetry and authorship.” It might not be too much to say that Dante’s place in the canon of World Literature is predicated on this foundational paradigm, where the exile proves to be not a solitary wanderer, but the leader of an increasingly dominant settler colonial regime that will ultimately flower into—as Virgil puts it in the *Aeneid*—“empire without end” [*imperium sine fine*].²⁸

In this light, Dante’s role as exile looks less romantic, less alluring, and less “vulnerable” than we imagined. This is the darker side of canon formation, which produces a certain form of subjectivity, makes it normative, and creates a readerly community (the unquestioning “we” or “us”) that participates in it. In order to fully grasp the impact of this formulation, where the figure of exile emerges as the founder of “civilization,” it is helpful to turn to J. V. Miranda’s “Bound by Sovereignty: The Problem of Reciprocity and the ‘Indigenous Turn’ in Medieval Studies.”²⁹ Miranda offers an analysis of the political philosophy of sovereignty in Dante’s *Monarchia* and the *Paradiso*, juxtaposed with a reading of Laguna Pueblo writer Leslie Marmon Silko’s novel *Ceremony* (1977). He argues that we can identify a “politics of recognition” in Dante’s writing, where apparent reciprocity and mutuality are, in fact, disallowed by an underlying imbalance of power (*M*, 137). Agreements entered into within this politics of recognition, Miranda suggests, can never live up to their claims of mutuality. Accordingly, the treatment of free will in chapter 12 of the *Monarchia* and in canto 5 of the *Paradiso* is, Miranda claims, evidence of a juridical system where heavenly sovereignty provides a template for temporal sovereignty.

Commenting on Beatrice’s words on free will in *Paradiso* 5, Miranda writes:

While it would require a much longer discussion to unpack medieval debates surrounding free will, it is evident here how Dante binds popular sovereignty to free will through the notion of a surrendered gift of liberty that will reconcile the sinner to God. Perhaps more telling, this reconciliation works through consent and compact whereby giving up one’s liberty, giving oneself over, to the sovereign power of the divine leads to salvation. In the temporal realm, the consent to be governed also implies an understanding of what is best for humanity, since “only under the monarch does humankind exist for itself.” To be free, just as to be saved, it is necessary to give up the gift of individual freedom and by extension popular sovereignty. (*M*, 141)

Miranda goes on to explicitly link this politics of recognition, which he identifies in Dante, with a long history of hegemonic sovereignty, continuing on into the present day with modern governments' cynical use of 'recognition' as a means to limit the resurgence of Indigenous tribes and nations:

By turning to Dante, specifically *Monarchia* and *Paradiso*, I want to provide an entry point for considering the political dimensions of recognition during this period and suggest that the Western episteme of governance involves a hierarchical logic of sovereignty that is expressed and enacted by the authority to recognize emergent, embedded, and coexistent sovereign entities. This logic underwrites the state's efforts to define or, perhaps more aptly, confine Indigenous sovereignty through recognition in the context of liberal democracies. (*M*, 143)

Miranda's analysis shows us that the coercive power of exile that we observed earlier, where the fugitive proves to be not a solitary wanderer but the leader of a new imperial order, is far from an isolated case. Miranda's account of the politics of recognition in the *Monarchia* and the *Paradiso* pries open the apparent position of vulnerability that is epitomized in the figure of exile, so that we can see clearly how that figure's apparent powerlessness becomes the foundation of a logic of sovereignty that would go on to have dramatic real-world consequences.

It is at this juncture that Miranda expresses strong hesitation about the project of bringing together Medieval Studies with Indigenous Studies, stating that there are "irresolvable antagonisms" that prevent any full relationship from developing between these fields—or, indeed, between Indigenous Studies and any historical field grounded in western epistemology (*M*, 138). Even so, Miranda writes, it remains useful to think about the implications of this encounter: "Despite these limitations, I maintain that the question of reciprocity remains worth asking, if not for actualizing a medieval decolonial praxis, then for deepening our understanding of the potential to impose, reveal, and disrupt the logic of modern sovereignty that underwrites colonial governance and empire" (*M*, 138). At best, Miranda states, we might "discuss, debate, and envision what a decolonial praxis might be within medieval studies" (*M*, 147).

Bearing in mind Miranda's insightful and provocative reading of Dante, I want to pause here to consider the danger of being

extractive, figuring out “what we can gain” or “what the value might be” by drawing upon the work of Indigenous scholars, writers, and artists. It is essential that we not regard “the Indigenous turn” as simply another fashion in the field of Medieval Studies, or in literary or historical studies more broadly. It is necessary, as noted above, to slow down and consider how the very assumptions of our disciplines are shaken by this encounter, and by reckoning with the histories of the land we live and work on, as well as the imperial and colonial histories of the disciplines we inhabit. We should be unsettled by this experience, to use the words of Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, and expect to find many of our most cherished assumptions upended.

In approaching the work of Indigenous scholars, in a respectful and patient way, we would do well to be guided by Tarren Andrews’s (Bitterroot Salish) comments in the special issue of *English Language Notes* on “Indigenous Futures and Medieval Pasts” that she co-edited with Tiffany Beechy. (Miranda’s article appears in that same volume.) In the shared dialogue with Wallace Cleaves (Tongva) that concludes the collection, Andrews states, “One of my concerns—the reason I really wanted to do this special issue—is my own sense of worry about appropriation.”³⁰ The ensuing dialogue between Andrews and Cleaves recognizes the importance of intention (“the intention still matters”) and the challenge in negotiating the range of Indigenous epistemologies, where everyone—Indigenous or non-Indigenous—is “always in danger of being appropriative” when drawing on materials from outside one’s own nation or tribe.³¹ If this is true even for an Indigenous person who draws upon a knowledge system that emerges from a nation other than their own, it is clearly an infinitely greater danger for a non-Indigenous person.

Cleaves states that he believes that this challenge can be met, although “it is only possible with a great deal of commitment, energy, time, understanding, and humility”—the last of these, “the idea of humility,” seconded by Andrews.³² In her introduction to the special issue of *ELN*, Andrews explicitly cautions non-Indigenous scholars to “recognize the limitations of Western epistemologies and methodologies,” which “all too often result in good intentions that are fundamentally appropriative and complicit in ongoing Indigenous erasure.”³³ The solution, Andrews suggests elsewhere in her introduction, is to take it slowly—“to slow down medievalist engagement with Indigenous studies, to ask us all to be more

deliberate, to be thoughtful, and to consider first the ethics of kinship and reciprocity.”³⁴

In this spirit of taking it slowly, mindful of Andrews’s words, I would encourage those who are interested in the so-called Indigenous turn to begin the long process of unsettling and then relearning patterns of thought and methods of research. In using these words, I am following Tuck and Yang who ground their foundational article, “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” on the urgency—and necessary discomfort—of “unsettling”: “Our goal in this essay is to remind readers what is unsettling about decolonization—what is unsettling and what should be unsettling.”³⁵ As we reflect on literary history, thinking about what stories we would like to tell, we should remain consistently attentive to the voices of Indigenous writers, researchers, and artists. As Andrews puts it, non-Indigenous medievalists need “to ask what it might look like to ‘extend an invitation,’ rather than ‘engage with,’ Indigenous studies scholars” (A, 2). Only by extending an invitation and then in turn being invited in does it become possible to participate in doing the necessary work—and, in time, to attain what the late Stó:lō writer Lee Maracle describes as “the good mind” or, as Andrews puts it, “a good heart.”³⁶

III. DECOLONIZATION: “DANCING ON SATURN’S RINGS”

Is there a way forward, at the intersection of historical fields with Indigenous Studies? As we saw, Miranda expresses skepticism about the encounter, stating that “Indigenous sovereignty pivots on a refusal of Western epistemologies, thus calling into question the possibility, not to mention the underlying ethical concerns, that must be considered when a Western field of study proposes an ‘Indigenous turn’” (M, 145). Andrews and Cleaves, by contrast, leave the door open, making space for intentionality and the gradual development of good relations. But their more optimistic, welcoming view can be realistic only if we—and by “we” I mean all those who work on historical fields—are willing to do the patient, hard work of unlearning certain structures of thought. The romance of exile, the interplay of sovereignty and free will, and the monumentality of the canon are all in need of being shaken up, of being unsettled. This does not mean that we cannot continue to read or teach Dante, or Chaucer, or any other canonical writer: it does mean that we need to think carefully about the ground we read them on.

The methodology I outline here emerges from this long, patient process of unlearning and learning. I am grateful to have the opportunity to learn about the local history of the land I live on; to develop relationships with some of the people who maintain a traditional relationship of stewardship to that land; to learn the language originally spoken there; and to participate in work that serves the self-determined priorities of Lenape communities.³⁷ I am aware of and want to be very clear in acknowledging the limitations of my knowledge, but I also want to be mindful of my responsibilities to share what I have learned—in this case, a methodology of reading that opens up alternative ways of thinking about some of the paradigms and templates of thought that are central to the literature we study, teach, and write about.

Some would describe this move as “decolonizing” literary history, and indeed this language of decolonization does appear in the closing essay of *The Oxford Handbook of Dante*, written by the late feminist scholar Marguerite Waller. In this chapter, Waller draws on what she calls “decolonial feminism” to produce “new readings of the *Commedia*”:

I begin with Maria Lugones and Silvia Federici, whose accounts of Europe’s restructuring of the sensoria of its own population, as well as those encountered in the New World, posit the coloniality of gender itself. If contemporary decolonial feminism galvanizes new readings of the *Commedia*, the poem returns the favor. Dante’s engagement with the political, cultural, and ideological inheritances of the Roman Empire (with nods toward several other empires) and with an increasingly imperial papacy weaves Europe’s post-1492 history into the deep time of Mediterranean and continental imperial and anti-imperial struggle, dehegemonizing the “Europe” and “Christianity” of colonial historiography. (*D*, 704)

Drawing together historical accounts of religious practice in the earlier Middle Ages, prior to the twelfth century, with contemporary Latin American feminist thought, Waller aims to reveal the “decolonial” qualities embedded in Dante’s text, illuminating a relationship of reciprocity where a reading of Dante is informed by the work of Latin American feminists and, in Waller’s words, “the poem returns the favor.” Waller goes on to elaborate the nature of a “decolonial Dante,” where “the pilgrim [makes] his way toward a non-centric, relational ‘pluriverse’ (to borrow another decolonial term) that cannot be accessed via the one-world ontology of imperial history”

(*D*, 713). Waller's decolonial Dante emerges fully in her reading of canto 7 of the *Paradiso*, where she brings together sovereignty, free will, and the exuberant fluidity of the celestial rose:

Beatrice's gloss on Justinian's narrative in *Paradiso* VII carries this relational activity even further. Her explication of the Crucifixion includes making a crucial distinction between sovereignty, which simply pardoning Adam's sin would have enacted, and free will, which could be preserved only by God's humbling himself in an act of love. Far from being neutralized, subsumed into a totalizing, teleological, imperial schema, the story of Titus explodes in *Paradiso* into a kind of multidimensional rose window or scintillating mosaic program, which mediates fluid engagements with the past that are dramatic, contingent, and ever changing rather than linear and fixed. (*D*, 717)

As we saw earlier, Miranda points out the disturbing nature of this bargain, where "Dante binds popular sovereignty to free will through the notion of a surrendered gift of liberty that will reconcile the sinner to God . . . giving up one's liberty, giving oneself over, to the sovereign power of the divine leads to salvation. . . . To be free, just as to be saved, it is necessary to give up the gift of individual freedom and by extension popular sovereignty" (*M*, 141). Where Miranda sees a trap set by a long history of hegemonic sovereignty, Waller sees an exuberant "pluriverse" of contingency and fluidity. This seductive vision, however, comes from a metaphorical understanding of "decolonization," which (Tuck and Yang made clear in their foundational article) "is not a metaphor." Decolonization pertains to land, water, and other tangible manifestations of Indigenous sovereignty; to use it as a metaphor evacuates the real-world meaning of the term. The clash of western epistemologies and Indigenous understandings of decolonization are, in large part, what lies behind Miranda's reluctance to hold out much hope for the encounter of historical fields with Indigenous Studies.

Following Andrews and Cleaves's encouragement to "extend an invitation" and wait "to be invited in," building a web of relationality, it is helpful to return to the work of the Delaware scholar Joanne Barker. Best known for her work in political philosophy, particularly her important 2018 article on Wall Street, "Territory as Analytic: The Dispossession of Lenapehoking and the Subprime Crisis," Barker is also the author of an extraordinary article plus

photo galleries called “Decolonizing the Mind,” mentioned above.³⁸ In the opening, she lays out the structure of this piece:

This essay makes use of several genres of writing—analysis, storytelling, memoir—to provoke (not explain) meaningful, contextualized engagement with the included images. These images are organized into five collections: (1) The Land, (2) Sky Woman, (3) Violences, (4) The Sacred (Pleasures), and (5) Indigenous Futurisms. I think that, throughout the images, I would define my artwork in the context of my struggle to ‘decolonize my mind,’ a struggle that includes but is not contained in artwork as a language, a form of communication, a mode of cultural practice and resurgence.³⁹

It might seem that Barker is using the term “decolonizing” in a metaphorical way: unlike “Territory as Analytic,” with its nuanced account of the economic history and political implications of the subprime crisis and the Occupy Wall Street movement, “decolonization” in this article is not referring primarily to land, water, or other tangible materials. Yet Barker makes it clear that this act, the “struggle to ‘decolonize my mind,’” overflows the artwork itself. The art, like her political philosophy, is fully integrated within her world view, her sense of self, and her means of communicating with others.

One of the images from the galleries of “Decolonizing the Mind” depicts a figure that is at once Barker’s own body and our mother earth (Kukuna Ahkuy)—that is, Lunaapahkiing (see Figure 1).⁴⁰ By rotating the image slightly, it is possible to see how this figure is comprised of the rivers and land forms that can be seen on a map of the northeastern Atlantic coast: her limbs, body, face, and hair correspond to areas that are labelled on Euro-American maps as New Jersey, southern New York, eastern Pennsylvania, and Delaware. Barker’s visionary landscapes are not restricted to the Earth, extending to include fertile planting sites on other planets and even her own figure “Dancing on Saturn’s Rings.”⁴¹ This dance is both celebration and generative act, bringing growth and renewal; Indigenous futurity appears not as an essentialist vision of a pastoral bygone time, but rather as an innovative imagining of what could be. The traditional planting practice of the “Three Sisters,” made up of corn, beans, and squash, appears in Barker’s artwork in a new setting—bringing growth and fecundity to Mars, with a still-verdant Earth and the Star Nations just behind.



Fig. 1. “Lenapehoking: An Imprint” (2021). An earlier version was published as Figure 2 in Joanne Barker, “Decolonizing the Mind,” *Rethinking Marxism* 30:2 (2018): 208-31. Reproduced by kind permission of the artist.

This heavenly vision is very different from the ordered universe of Dante’s *Paradiso*. The celestial rose, and even the tripartite vision of the divine in the midst of the spheres, are grounded in a vision of the cosmos that upholds a particularly restrictive notion of sovereignty that sacrifices the will of the individual. In saying this, I do not suggest that we stop reading or teaching Dante, Chaucer, or any other canonical writer. I am, however, suggesting that we should read and teach with both eyes open, aware of both the transgressive and fecund nature of the poet’s vision, and the monumental, sometimes oppressive weight of Dante’s legacy, especially his political philosophy.⁴² The first steps in this approach require that we reflect on what is taking place in the processes of canonization, anthologizing, and literary periodization, and to ground this reflection in a local, situated way. My aim is not to give a verdict on whether to read (or teach) Dante, or any other

canonical author of European literary history. Instead, I have sought to model what it might look like to read locally, to begin not with the author but with the ground that we stand on. To this end, I began by suggesting that we read with an awareness of the land we live and work on, mindful of Barker's clear statement of how Lenape lands—but not just those lands, acknowledging the Chochoyeno Ohlone land she inhabits—“define [her] relationships and responsibilities.”⁴³ After drawing out some implications concerning the language of diaspora as it is used by the Delaware Tribe of Oklahoma, I returned to Barker's “Decolonizing the Mind,” juxtaposing her visionary narrative with the celestial rose of Dante's *Paradiso*. I chose these points of reference to signal the contingent nature of my reading, not just with regard to my own individual subject position (to which I alluded in discussing Dante's depiction of Muhammad and Ali) but also with regard to my communal, relational position as a person who lives on Lunaapahkiing. This is not the same as claiming kinship ties or being claimed by a particular nation; that would be a different conversation. Instead, the kind of reading I have modelled here is based on a sense of responsibility that is open to anyone who approaches the land they are on and its people with a good heart and good mind. This is, in some ways, an intensely local way of reading; paradoxically, though, it leads to the stars, and envisions a future that exists in the present.

This concept of futurity re-emerges in Barker's most recent book, *Red Scare* (2021), where she states “the future is not something we are waiting for, but rather is already embodied in our relationships with one another. These relationships anticipate the abolition of state imperialism and the real alternative of Indigenous governance.”⁴⁴ Roots—which in western epistemologies are associated with origins, the distant past, and a teleology of development—are recast in Barker's work as a “vibrant” present-day network of exchange, growth, and “intergenerationality”:

Roots, huckleberry and otherwise, are interdependent. Diverse forms of life exchange water, minerals, chemicals, and information through them. As a result of this exchange, roots are able to modify their growth, respond to one another's needs, and anchor themselves against external stresses. In their relationships to one another, they assume responsibilities for one another. They modify, adjust, and support, with older ones taking special care of and mentoring younger ones. They do not compete over resources or space.

The vibrant relationships of root systems require engaged communication and caring attentiveness, the exchange of information, dedicated listening and seeing. This vibrancy defines a host of responsibilities characterized by intergenerationality, humility, deference, care, generosity, and reciprocity. There is no place for individual competitiveness in the health and vitality of the whole. Although single groups and individuals may live and grow, over time they will lose vibrancy. Diversity is required. Groups and individuals need others not like themselves. In this sense, diversity and interdependence are co-constitutive.⁴⁵

This positionality, where the individual is always already intertwined in a web of relationships, is a far cry from Dante's individual, the poet of exile, the paradigm of the cosmopolitan subject. The unsettling of western epistemologies that comes with this critical, self-reflective mode of reading is, for the state governments evoked in the opening of this article, tremendously threatening. And yet living in a time of crisis—both political crisis and climate crisis, the two of these themselves intertwined—requires this turn to Indigenous ways of knowing and of being in good relation. Like Miranda, I have my doubts about the ability of those of us who work in historical fields, themselves forged in the crucible of nineteenth-century nationalisms, to respond in a reciprocal way to the invitations that may come from Indigenous scholars, knowledge-keepers, and artists; but our only hope lies in being open to the radical futurity that lies waiting in the now.

Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton

NOTES

I am grateful to those who read and commented on this article as it developed, including those who attended the meeting of The English Institute at UC Irvine, on 7–8 October 2022; the Lexicon Project Working Group seminar at the University of Chicago, on 28 February 2023; and the seminar in Research Area 3, “Future Perfect,” hosted by “EXC 2020: Temporal Communities: Doing Literature in a Global Perspective” (Project ID 390608380) at the Freie Universität Berlin, on 19 June 2023. Early versions of parts of this work were shared in the “Decentering Dante” lecture series hosted by the ICI Kulturlabor, Berlin, on 10 May 2021 (“What Ground Do We Read On? Reading Canonical Authors in Unsettling Times”) and at the Modern Language Association's annual meeting, on 7–10 January 2021 (“Honeysuckle: Land, Myth, and Story in *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Legend of Good Women*”). I want particularly to thank Tarren Andrews for her thoughtful comments on an earlier draft and for her generous encouragement, and to thank Joanne Barker for her kind permission to reproduce her artwork.

¹“General education core courses may not distort significant historical events or include a curriculum that teaches identity politics, violates s. 1000.05, or is based on theories that systemic racism, sexism, oppression, and privilege are inherent in the institutions of the United States and were created to maintain social, political, and economic inequities. General education core courses must meet the following standards: 1. Communication courses must afford students the ability to communicate effectively, including the ability to write clearly and engage in public speaking. 2. Humanities courses must afford students the ability to think critically through the mastering of subjects concerned with human culture, especially literature, history, art, music, and philosophy, and must include selections from the Western canon.” Excerpted from the final version of SB 266 as passed by the Florida legislature (19, lines 555–570), available at: <https://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2023/266>.

²“The College considers itself a trustee of our Western philosophical and theological inheritance tracing to Athens and Jerusalem, a heritage finding its clearest expression in the American experiment of self-government under law” (“Welcome to Hillsdale.” Hillsdale College, <https://www.hillsdale.edu/admissions-aid/admissions-2/>). “‘The Great Books play an integral role in students’ education at Hillsdale College,’ said Hillsdale College Provost Christopher VanOrman. ‘These books provide timeless lessons concerning human nature, virtue, self-government, and liberty, and we are proud to be recognized by the James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal for our commitment to the great books’” (“Hillsdale College recognized for its Great Books Program.” Hillsdale Daily News, <https://www.hillsdale.net/story/news/education/2023/05/05/hillsdale-college-recognized-for-its-great-books-program/70182757007/>). “The College provides curriculum, training, and resources for public schools, private schools, and families. We collaborate with parents, teachers, school leaders, board members, and policy makers to found and support a nationwide network of classical schools that revive the American tradition of K-12 education” (“Reviving the American Tradition of K-12 Education.” Hillsdale College, <https://k12.hillsdale.edu/>).

³Quotation from Manny Diaz in Nirvi Shah, “Can Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis re-create Michigan’s Hillsdale College in his state?” *USA Today*, 15 January 2023, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/education/2023/01/15/what-hillsdale-college-florida-gov-desantis-wants-replicate/11048401002/>.

⁴Quotation from Ron DeSantis in A. G. Gancarski, “At Hillsdale, Ron DeSantis says New College will be a ‘little Hillsdale.’” *Florida Politics*, 6 April 2023, <https://floridapolitics.com/archives/601690-at-hillsdale-ron-desantis-says-new-college-will-be-a-little-hillsdale/>.

⁵Douglas Ray, “UF receives \$3 million for new civics program with conservative links.” *The Gainesville Sun*, 15 July 2022, <https://www.gainesville.com/story/news/education/campus/2022/07/15/university-florida-gets-3-million-classical-civics-program-backed-organization-linked-conservatives/10067439002/>.

⁶The Hamilton Center’s mission statement appears at “Promoting Scholarship and Shaping Leaders for a Free Society: Join our Quest for Truth.” Hamilton Center: University of Florida, <https://hamilton.center.ufl.edu/>.

⁷“Promoting Scholarship,” <https://hamilton.center.ufl.edu>.

⁸Course listings for Spring 2023 and Fall 2023 are at “Hamilton Center Courses: Spring 2023,” Hamilton Center: University of Florida, <https://hamilton.center.ufl.edu/courses/spring-2023/> and “Hamilton Center Courses: Fall 2023,” Hamilton Center, University of Florida, <https://hamilton.center.ufl.edu/courses/fall-2023/>.

⁹For an overview of the history of Columbia's Literature Humanities curriculum, along with a useful compilation of Lit Hum course syllabi, see David Denby, *Great Books: My Adventures with Homer, Rousseau, Woolf, and Other Indestructible Writers of the Western World* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

¹⁰"Each episode centers on one literary work, often a 'great book,' by which we mean one of two things: a book that is canonical, long recognized as important and influential (Homer! Dante! Shakespeare!), or a book that one of us really loves. Some of our book choices fit both of these categories, and we talk about the suppositions and biases that lead to a book being labeled 'great'; we also talk about our affective response, what makes the book seem 'great'—or at least important, beautiful, meaningful—to us. What time do we inhabit, when we read this book? What do we share?" (Suzanne Conklin Akbari, "The Encyclopedic Genius of Melville's Masterpiece: On *Moby Dick* as a Way of Seeing the World." *Literary Hub*, 1 August 2019. <https://lithub.com/the-encyclopedic-genius-of-melvilles-masterpiece/>.) The Spouter-Inn can be found at Suzanne Conklin Akbari and Chris Piuma, "The Spouter-Inn: Or, A Conversation with Great Books." Megaphonic, <https://www.megaphonic.fm/spouter>. Co-editor, responsible for Volume B: 100 to 1500 of *The Norton Anthology of World Literature* (4th revised ed., 6 vol. New York: W. W. Norton, 2018); *The Norton Anthology of World Literature* (3rd revised ed., 6 vol. New York: W. W. Norton, 2012); *The Norton Anthology of World Literature* (Shorter Third Edition. 2 vol. New York: W. W. Norton, 2012); *The Norton Anthology of Western Literature* (9th revised edition. 2 vol. New York: W. W. Norton, 2014).

¹¹On situatedness based on attentiveness to Indigenous land in New York, and to Indigenous belongings currently located in museums in Germany, see Suzanne Conklin Akbari, "Byzantine Purple, Wampum Purple: The Global Middle Ages on Lunaapahkiing," special issue of *Exemplaria* on "After Abu-Lughod: Comparative Frames for a Global Middle Ages," ed. Shirin Khanmohamadi (to appear 2025).

¹²Joanne Barker, "Decolonizing the Mind," *Rethinking Marxism* 30 (2018): 208–31; quotation from 210. The traditional territory of the Lenape people (or "Lunaapeew") comprises the lands now labeled on maps as New Jersey, southern New York state along the Hudson River, eastern Pennsylvania along the Delaware River, and the northern part of Delaware. Displaced Lenape people continue to maintain a relationship to Lunaapahkiing while living in their tribal nations, which include three tribal nations recognized by the US government (the Delaware Tribe and Delaware Nation, both located in Oklahoma, and the Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohican Indians, located in Wisconsin) and two tribal nations recognized by the Canadian government (Eelunaapeewi Lahkeewit or Delaware Nation at Moraviantown, and Munsee-Delaware Nation), located in Ontario; there are also Delaware people within Six Nations of the Grand River. In addition, three tribal nations are recognized by the state of New Jersey, including the Ramapough Lunaape Nation, the Nanticoke Indian Tribe, and the Powhatan Renape Nation. Lenape land is also named as "Lenapehoking" or "Lenapehokink," following Unami orthography, but here I have followed the Munsee orthography, "Lunaapahkiing," which makes visible the land ("ahkuy") within the placename (shared by the late Karen Mosko, language-keeper, Munsee-Delaware Nation).

¹³Frank Davey in Greg Curnoe, *Deeds / Abstracts: The History of a London Lot*, ed. Frank Davey (London: Brick Books, 1995), 15–16. See Curnoe, *Deeds / Nations*, ed. Frank Davey and Neal Ferris (London Chapter, Ontario Archeological Society, Occasional Publications #4 (Toronto: Coach House Printing, 1996). Curnoe's

research, carried out in collaboration with descendants of those incorporated in the appendix and also published posthumously, as *Deeds / Nations*, was brought to my attention by the late Munsee-Delaware historian Mark Peters.

¹⁴ Frank Davey, vii.

¹⁵ On the intersection of Medieval Studies and World Literature, see Suzanne Conklin Akbari, “Modeling Medieval World Literature,” *Middle Eastern Literatures* 20 (2017): 1–16, esp. 4–7; on entanglement and connectivity in Mediterranean Studies, see Akbari, “The Persistence of Philology: Language and Connectivity in the Mediterranean,” *A Sea of Languages: Rethinking the Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History*, ed. Akbari and Karla Mallette (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2013), 3–22, esp. 5–10.

¹⁶ *The Oxford Handbook of Dante*, ed. Manuele Gragnolati, Elena Lombardi, and Francesca Southerden (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2021), xxxii. Hereafter abbreviated D and cited parenthetically by page number in the text.

¹⁷ See *Chaucer Handbook*, section headings: 1) Biography and Circumstances of Daily Life; 2) Chaucer in the Mediterranean Frame; 3) Chaucer in the European Frame; 4) Philosophy and Science in the Universities; 5) Christian Doctrine and Religious Heterodoxy; 6) The Chaucerian Afterlife. *The Oxford Handbook of Chaucer*, ed. Suzanne Conklin Akbari and James Simpson (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2020).

¹⁸ *Chaucer Handbook*, 3.

¹⁹ On my own experiences of reading as a Muslim, see Suzanne Conklin Akbari, “The Object of Devotion: Fundamentalist Perspectives on the Medieval Past,” *Religion and Literature* 42.1 (2010): 299–315, esp. 308–10. On Dante’s depiction of Muhammad and Ali, see Akbari, “Islam and Islamic Culture” (520–23) and “Saracens” (763) in *The Dante Encyclopedia*, gen. ed. Richard Lansing (New York: Garland, 2000); see also Akbari, *Idols in the East: European Representations of Islam and the Orient*, Chapter 5: “Empty Idols and a False Prophet” (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press), 200–247.

²⁰ Shokoofeh Rajabzadeh, “The Depoliticized Saracen and Muslim Erasure,” *Literature Compass* 16 (2019): 2 (Special Issue: Critical Race and the Middle Ages).

²¹ Rajabzadeh, 5.

²² *Chaucer Handbook*, 3–4.

²³ On the fecundity of Auerbach’s experience of exile in Istanbul, see Kader Konuk, *East West Mimesis: Auerbach in Turkey* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2010). On Said’s intertextual relationship with Auerbach, and on his vexed relationship to the “Western canon”—including Dante—see Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (New York: Verso, 1992), esp. 163–68; and Suzanne Conklin Akbari, “Medieval Orientalism,” *Idols in the East* 1–19, esp. 6–9.

²⁴ On the extension of “diaspora” from specific reference to Jewish history to refer to a range of national and ethnic migrations, and the applicability of theoretical frameworks from Diasporic Studies to Medieval Studies, see Suzanne Conklin Akbari, “Between Diaspora and Conquest: Norman Assimilation in Petrus Alfonsi’s *Disciplina Clericalis* and Marie de France’s *Fables*,” in *Cultural Diversity in the British Middle Ages: Archipelago, Island, England*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 17–37. esp. 19–22.

²⁵ The phrase first appears in 2009, in Brice Obermeier’s *Delaware Tribe in a Cherokee Nation*, and was among the excerpts from that book added to the Delaware Tribe of Oklahoma’s website in 2012 (Official Website of the Delaware Tribe of Indians,

“Removal History of the Delaware Tribe,” <https://delawaretribe.org/services-and-programs/historic-preservation/removal-history-of-the-delaware-tribe/>). The concept was disseminated widely in 2021 by the Lenape Center in Manhattan, whose website’s landing page reads “DIASPORA: Lenape Center proudly acknowledges that the Lenape diaspora includes five federally-recognized nations in Oklahoma, Wisconsin, and Ontario. Lenape Center does not speak for these nations and recognizes they have active thriving tribal governments that speak for themselves” (Lenape Center, <https://lenape.center/>). “The tumultuous years surrounding the American Revolution led to a Delaware diaspora that would further define the nucleus of the Delaware Tribe and create the boundaries between the many Delaware-descended groups that exist today.” Brice Obermeier, *Delaware Tribe in a Cherokee Nation* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2009), 43.

²⁶ Lenape relationships to land are complex, especially as mediated through the language of diaspora. For a brief yet useful overview, see Jay Miller, “Kwulakan: The Delaware Side of Their Movement West,” *Pennsylvania Archaeologist* 45.4 (1975): 45–46.

²⁷ “Tu proverai sì come sa di sale
 lo pane altrui, e come è duro calle
 lo scendere e ’l salir per l’altrui scale.”
 “You shall come to know how salt is the taste
 Of another’s bread, and how hard the path
 To descend and mount by another man’s stairs”

(*The Divine Comedy: Translated, With a Commentary, by Charles S. Singleton: Paradiso: I. Italian Text and Translation* [Volume 3 of Bollingen Series LXXX, *The Divine Comedy* of Dante Alighieri] [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1975]; quotation from page 191, 17.58–60).

²⁸ *Aeneid in Virgil. Eclogues. Georgics. Aeneid: Books 1–6*. Translated by H. Rushton Fairclough. Revised by G. P. Goold. Loeb Classical Library 63 (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1916), 1.279.

²⁹ J. V. Miranda, “Bound by Sovereignty: The Problem of Reciprocity and the ‘Indigenous Turn’ in Medieval Studies,” *English Language Notes* 58.2 (2020): 135–50. Hereafter abbreviated M and cited parenthetically by page number.

³⁰ Tarren Andrews and Wallace Cleaves, “Indigenous Futures and Medieval Pasts: A Conversation,” *English Language Notes* 58 (2020): 167–79.

³¹ Andrews and Cleaves, 170, 171.

³² Andrews and Cleaves, 171.

³³ “Like other calls to decolonize the academy, the Indigenous turn in medieval studies has seemed largely well intentioned—an affective force I do not believe should be taken for granted. However, when creating space for positive affective engagements with our work, Indigenous peoples are, as we must be, careful to insist that non-Indigenous scholars recognize the limitations of Western epistemologies and methodologies to get Indigenous studies ‘right,’ as it were. These limitations all too often result in good intentions that are fundamentally appropriative and complicit in ongoing Indigenous erasure, which Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang have called ‘moves to innocence.’” (Tarren Andrews, “Indigenous Futures and Medieval Pasts: An Introduction,” *English Language Notes* 58 [2020]: 1–17; quotation from 12.

³⁴ Andrews, 2.

³⁵ Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1 (2012): 1–40; quotation at 3.

³⁶ Lee Maracle, *Memory Serves: Oratories*, ed. Smaro Kamboureli (Edmonton: NeWest, 2015) 11; Andrews, 2.

³⁷ On these relationships and collaborations that bring together Lenape (Delaware) community members with those working and living on Lunaapahkiing, see Suzanne Conklin Akbari, Ian McCallum, Melissa Moreton, and Anu Vedantham, “Huluniixsuwaakan: The Role of the Library in Munsee Delaware Language Revitalization and the Development of Community Relationships on Lunaape Land,” *Library Trends* 72.1 (2023): 122–148 (special issue on “Indigenous Librarianship,” ed. Ulia Gosart and Rachel Fu).

³⁸ Joanne Barker, “Territory as Analytic: The Dispossession of Lenapehoking and the Subprime Crisis,” *Social Text* 36 (2018): 19–39.

³⁹ Barker, “Decolonizing the Mind,” 208.

⁴⁰ Barker, “Decolonizing the Mind,” figure 2: “Lenapehoking: An Imprint.”

⁴¹ Barker, “Decolonizing the Mind,” figure 6: “Sky Woman Dancing on Mars”; figure 7, “Sky Woman Taking a Break on Mars”; figure 16: “Dancing on Saturn’s Rings”; figure 17, “Three Sisters on Mars.”

⁴² On etuaptmumk (Mi’kmaw, ‘two-eyed seeing’), see Brenna Duperron and Elizabeth Edwards, “Thinking Indigeneity: A Challenge to Medieval Studies,” *Exemplaria* 33 (2021): 94–107.

⁴³ Barker, “Decolonizing the Mind,” 210.

⁴⁴ Barker, *Red Scare: The State’s Indigenous Terrorist* (Oakland: Univ. of California Press, 2021), 25.

⁴⁵ Barker, *Red Scare*, 123–24.



PROJECT MUSE®

Exile, Diaspora, and Sovereignty: Rethinking the Medieval
Canon on Indigenous Lands

Suzanne Conklin Akbari

ELH, Volume 91, Number 4, Winter 2024, pp. 1055-1081 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/elh.2024.a945313>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/945313>