

“Seeds, Husks, or Dried Flowers: Shaping Attentive Practices and Settler Colonial Land Ethics Through the Use of Botanical Metaphors in Ethnographies of Native American Song”

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If music is energy transduced through matter, how are we to write about this powerful phenomenon? Many thinkers have reached toward metaphors to describe music and its effect in the world, and in the nineteenth century, Euro-American theorists regularly drew metaphorical linkages between music and botanical models of fertilization, growth, and decay (Thaler 1984, Spitzer 2004, Watkins 2018). In this talk, we focus on how the botanical metaphors that settler colonial anthropologists applied to Native American song conditioned attentive practices while simultaneously determining land settlement and agricultural management practices in the present day. Focusing on American ethnographies of Umo^{ho}/Omaha and A:shiwí/Zuni song from the pivotal era between 1880-1910—when Manifest Destiny completed the coast-to-coast expansion of the United States, and Native lands were partitioned into properties for sale—we argue that their metaphors connecting Native song to exotic dessicated flowers waiting for taxonomification (Gilman 1908), or grains with digestible seeds waiting to be separated from their husks (Fillmore 1893), directed attentions towards acoustical features that might eventually support the capitalization of Native culture along with Native lands. More broadly, this paper is part of a larger project that calls for greater examination of and attention to metaphorical usage and their underlying, but often masked values, within music.