

"She Moves Through Deep Corridors": Mobility and Settler Colonialism in Sharon Doubiago's Proletarian Eco-Epic *Hard Country*¹

Judith Rauscher
University of Bamberg, Germany
judith.rauscher@uni-bamberg.de

DOI: [HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.37536/ECOZONA.2020.11.1.3297](https://doi.org/10.37536/ECOZONA.2020.11.1.3297)



Abstract

This article analyzes Sharon Doubiago's American long poem *Hard Country* (1982) from the joined perspectives of ecocriticism and mobility studies. It argues that *Hard Country* is a proletarian eco-epic that rethinks human-nature relations from a working-class perspective shaped by different kinds of (im)mobility. In my analysis, I show how the text revises the American epic tradition by foregrounding working-class people's desire for meaningful relationships to place in light of histories of environmental injustice and displacement. Doubiago's text promotes traditional place-based notions of belonging, but it also challenges ideas about what kind of sense of place can be environmentally suggestive. In doing so, it allows for the emergence of a proletarian "ecopoetics of mobility" (Gerhardt) that emphasizes the bodily experiences of Doubiago's mobile narrator as well as U.S.-American histories and cultures of mobility. Among these cultures of mobility, settler colonialism stands out as a system of violent domination and form of environmental injustice (Whyte) that calls into question working-class people's desire to move or settle on dispossessed indigenous lands. As such, settler colonialism poses a challenge to Doubiago's proletarian eco-poetics of mobility, which must engage with the fact that white working-class people in the United States have always been perpetrators as well as victims of both environmental and mobility injustice.

Keywords: American literature, epic poetry, mobility, social class, settler colonialism.

Resumen

Este artículo presenta un análisis del extenso poema americano *Hard Country* (1982) de Sharon Doubiago, combinando la perspectiva ecocrítica con la de los estudios de movilidad. El argumento principal es que *Hard Country* es una epopeya ecológica proletaria que reconsidera las relaciones entre los seres humanos y la naturaleza desde una perspectiva de la clase obrera, influida por diferentes tipos de (in)movilidad. En mi análisis, demuestro cómo el texto revisa la tradición épica americana, focalizando el deseo de la gente de clase obrera de tener relaciones significativas con el lugar ante las historias de injusticia medioambiental y de desplazamiento. El texto de Doubiago fomenta nociones de arraigo tradicionales basadas en el lugar, pero también cuestiona ideas sobre qué sentido del lugar puede ser medioambientalmente sugerente. Así permite la emergencia de una "ecopoética de movilidad" (Gerhardt) proletaria que enfatiza tanto las experiencias corporales de la narradora móvil de Doubiago, como historias y culturas de movilidad estadounidenses. Entre estas culturas de movilidad, el colonialismo de los asentamientos destaca como un sistema de dominación violenta y como una forma de injusticia medioambiental (Whyte) que cuestiona el deseo de gente obrera de moverse o de establecerse en tierras

¹ The research for and preparation of this paper was generously supported by a grant of the German Research Foundation (DFG), entitled "The Environmental Imagination of Mobility: Umwelt und Migration in amerikanischer Gegenwartsdichtung" and led by Christine Gerhardt. I would also like to use this opportunity to thank the two anonymous reviewers whose criticism has pushed me to sharpen my argument about the role settler colonialism plays in Doubiago's epic poem.

arreatadas a los indígenas. De esta forma, el colonialismo de asentamiento plantea un desafío para la ecopoética de movilidad proletaria de Doubiago, que debe comprometerse con el hecho de que la gente blanca de clase obrera en los Estados Unidos siempre haya sido tanto víctima como responsable tanto de la injusticia medioambiental como de la injusticia de movilidad.

Palabras clave: Literatura americana, poesía épica, movilidad, clase social, colonialismo de asentamiento.

Sharon Doubiago, a contemporary American poet living in Southern California, is the author of several books of poetry, stories, and essays. Among ecocritics, she is primarily known as the author of the essay "Mama Coyote talks to the Boys" (1989), a scathing ecofeminist critique of deep ecology.² Doubiago's poetic works speak to her ecofeminist politics as well, but they also go beyond it. In her first published book of poetry, *Hard Country* (1982), Doubiago already began to explore human-nature relationships while simultaneously foregrounding problems of poetics and positionality that remain crucial for debates surrounding ecopoetics, ecocriticism, and environmentalism in the United States today. *Hard Country* develops "from the [U.S.-American] tradition of sprawling didactic cultural collage exemplified by Olson's Maximus Poems" (Keller, *Forms* 6) and is characterized by "its massive scale and public sweep, elliptical and paratactic construction, didactic societal critique, quest-based exploration of both past history and the nation's current state, and speaker at once individual and collective" (Keller, *Forms* 27). Written at least partly in response to the U.S. Bicentennial celebrations of the mid-1970s (Doubiago, "Afterword" 268), *Hard Country* is a postmodern American epic (Brennan et al. 509) that combines autobiographical, historical, and mythical elements.³ Organized primarily around the places that its female narrator Sharon inhabits or visits during extended travels through the United States and pervaded by "the ancient migratory theme" (Doubiago, "Afterword" 271), Doubiago's long poem explores the nation's past, present, and future by focusing on U.S.-American places and mobilities.

Hard Country foregrounds the ways in which different kinds of mobilities have shaped U.S.-American places and their histories. In this effort, it chronicles the narrator's

² Sharon Doubiago's "Mama Coyote talks to the Boys" criticizes the deep ecology movement for its sexism. This sexism, the poet argues, not only manifests in deep ecology's promotion of ecomasculinist, pseudo-universalist positions that refuse to recognize the gendered nature of human-nature relations, but also, more concretely, in deep ecologists' failure to acknowledge ecofeminist scholarship and its propositions for the kind of radical new ecological consciousness that deep ecology demands. Doubiago ends her short essay with the following appeal: "And so the paradigm change I am presenting to you: Ecologists must become feminists. If you don't, you are doomed to remain outside the real work of saving Earth" (44).

³ A long debate exists about the nature of the (post)modern American epic and its relationship to the (post)modern long poem. Considerably less has been said on the "female" (Schweizer 10), "feminist" (Dewey 72), or "woman's epic" (Keller, "To Remember" 307). When this largely neglected, yet highly diverse tradition is discussed, as in Lynn Keller's influential study *Forms Expansion: Recent Long Poems by Women* (1997) or Jeremy M. Downes's *The Female Homer: An Exploration of Women's Epic Poetry* (2006), Sharon Doubiago is usually identified as one of few female American poets whose work can be clearly identified as epic.

own travels, her grandparents' move from Tennessee to West Virginia, and her parents' work-related migration to California. It also evokes other historical mobilities, for example two legendary pre-Columbian explorations of North America, settlers' westward movement along the Oregon Trail, Native American removal, and the arrival of refugees in California after the Vietnam War. Commenting on this double-emphasis on place and (histories of) mobility, Jeremy Downes notes that the text's overarching narrative—the "circular journey of the hero and her current lover" (167)—is continuously interrupted by "many layers of subnarrative" (166) that have cumulative effect. In my reading of Doubiago's epic, I explore how narratives of mobility produce "places of depth" (Downes 167) in *Hard Country* and how they shape the representation of complex human-place relations in the text. I agree with Lynn Keller that Doubiago's epic text expresses an "urgent ecological awareness of the danger humans pose to themselves through failing to understand their place as part of the natural world" (*Forms* 39). Like Keller, I also find it noteworthy that the poet continuously highlights "the mixed positionality of the oppressed" (*Forms* 42) in an effort to challenge existing power hierarchies. Indeed, I see these two concerns as connected. In discussing how different kinds of (im)mobilities shape the lives of working-class people, Sharon Doubiago reveals the contradictory position that the working poor occupy in a nation built on capitalist exploitation and settler colonialism. Especially white working-class people, her long-poem indicates, are victims as well as perpetrators of both environmental and mobility injustice.

Revising the American Epic Tradition

Sharon Doubiago's poetry is both representational and rich in imagery, both narrative and lyrical. As Lynn Keller notes, Doubiago's "omnivorous free verse" (*Form* 19) is overall characterized by "straightforward documentary syntax" (27) but simultaneously relies on "fragmentation and parataxis, and on elaborate interweaving of motifs" (27). In its narrative passages, *Hard Country* chronicles a woman's life on the California coast and a road trip this woman, the narrator Sharon, takes across the United States. Throughout the epic poem, the narrator's experiences on the road are interspersed with personal memories and passages that link family histories to national histories of marginalization and oppression, allowing Doubiago to challenge "the discourses of nationalism with which the epic is entwined" (Goodman 449; see also Crown 80). Like other female poets revising the American epic tradition, Doubiago has to "wrestle with the mixed legacy of the largely male-authored modernist collage long poem, finding different strategies for capitalizing on its liberating dimensions while evading its misogynist ones" (Keller, *Forms* 16). Throughout *Hard Country*, Doubiago's narrator foregrounds a female perspective on hegemonic (patriarchal) accounts of national history, emphasizing those histories that resist triumphalist nationalist narratives:

[...] wading through stories and flesh,
and dislocation and death, searching for the key
to this overstuffed country, stories and people and land
I have pulled to myself, like sperm to the egg:
The American soul, hard, isolate, stoic, and as Lawrence said:
a killer. [...] (81)

Overwhelmed by the abyss that is the "American soul" but unable to turn away from the "stories and people and land," the narrator begins her very personal critical examination of "this overstuffed country" by turning to the coastal landscapes of her childhood:

In a land hard to love, in a harsh, masculine land
this was the first, these rhythmic, low-wide mesas
coming west from the mountains we lived in as girls
down to the sea, the first land I loved. (34)

Alluding to the book's title, the above passage denounces the United States as "a harsh, masculine land" that is "*hard* to love" (emphasis added). The grown narrator's desire to love her country with a devotion comparable to the one with which she used to love the "rhythmic, low-wide mesas" of Southern California as a young girl is one of the underlying themes of Doubiago's revisionist American epic. The impossibility of this desire is the poem's greatest tragedy, but it is also its most important lesson.

One reason why Doubiago's adult narrator cannot love the entire country as she loved the landscapes of her childhood is that she refuses to approach places as if the realm of nature was distinct from politics. When Sharon thinks about her beloved California coast, she must also take into account the ecological, social, and political realities of her day and the histories that produced them:

[...] I write this in verse, this letter to you
as a poem, this news story, these many stories, this essay,
this spilling and collecting of my life in these hills.
The details are ominous, journalistic, the experience
deepest poetry: how the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station
and Richard Nixon
share the south and north rim of the lagoon
down in which
the refugees and marines are camped,
at the mouth of which
beneath this bridge we cross over,
Mexican farmworkers are bent
all in a row
for our food.

We are blonde, we are never stopped at the border
checking stations, though I wonder
of everyone's exile here
where during the war I passed and saw
a doomed California Brown Pelican
rowing her prehistoric, now DDT lope
between the San Clemens White House
and the weeping juices of the setting sun (35)

Addressing environmental pollution, U.S. militarism, the plight of Vietnamese refugees, the racist logic underlying U.S. border policies as well as the exploitation of migrant workers, Doubiago's narrator resolves to write "deepest poetry" that reaches beyond the personal experiences of her "life in these hills." Her poetry, as Kathleen Crown puts it, "[bears] witness to the stories of the dispossessed" (80-1), wherever she encounters them. Such an endeavor entails a critical examination of her own social position. For even as the narrator muses whether everyone's relationship to the polluted lagoon may be viewed as one of "exile," she recognizes the privileges her racial background and citizenship status afford her. Not least, these include the privileges of whiteness and mobility: neither will Sharon be "stopped at the border" like the "Mexican farmworkers" mentioned in the excerpt, nor will she have much trouble traveling across the United States later in the epic poem.

Like in the above excerpt, Doubiago's epic poem repeatedly addresses issues of environmental degradation. *Hard Country* for example evokes the devastating effects of "atomic testing in the Pacific" (18), the "mountains sucked hollow for bombs" (87), or the logging of the ancient "Redwood Empire" (98) of Albion Ridge (see also Crown 81). At the same time, Doubiago is concerned with the lives and struggles of working-class people, whether she refers to the Mexican migrant laborers in the excerpt above, to waitresses like the narrator's mother (70), to seasonal farm workers like the narrator's father who used to catch "the freight to make the wheat harvest" (19), to a "black worker/ against East Texas oilfield" (211-212), or to striking Arizona miners who were "hauled out to the desert to die" (225) during the Bisbee Deportation of 1917. Linking environmental degradation with social injustice, Doubiago's long poem critiques the disruption and distortion by the capitalist system of the desire of working-class subjects for meaningful relationships to the more-than-human world. *Hard Country* can therefore be called not only an American eco-epic, but also a *proletarian* eco-epic.⁴

Sharon Doubiago's Proletarian Eco-Epic

Doubiago frequently addresses the place of working-class people in the nation by embedding the stories of her immediate and extended family into larger historical, political, economic, and environmental contexts. "Signal Hill," the very first poem of *Hard Country*, alludes to the narrator's own working-class background as well as to the complex relationship between California's oil industry and the United States' status as a military superpower. Because the narrator's mother is in hospital to be treated for tuberculosis, her father—who is described in other poems as either unemployed or doing odd-jobs—goes drinking "every Friday when he gets paid" (5; emphasis original),

⁴ Michelle M. Tokarczyk examines what she terms the American "working-class epic" in her article "Toward Imagined Solidarity in the Working-Class Epic: Chris Llewellyn's *Fragments from the Fire* and Diane Gilliam Fisher's *Kettle Bottom*" (2014). She also mentions Doubiago (869), without however identifying her as a possible precursor to the works she discusses.

leaving the children alone in the car outside a bar. From the parked car—a symbol of physical and social mobility in U.S. Culture as well as an emblem of the “human ‘mastery’ of nature” (Urry 51)—the children see the city that “*spreads beneath [them]/ in a rainbow-spilled oil puddle*” (5). In the distance, they perceive *the giant robots that pump/ the fields*” (5) and the “*battleships/ that strain at their ropes/ toward bigger war across the sea*” (5). The references to the pump robots and the oil puddle evoke the environmental costs of California’s coastal oil industry, costs addressed again in a later passage that mentions the “*polluted waters/ beneath Signal Hill*” (240). The mention of a “*bigger war across the sea*” points to the “smaller” wars at home, which include, as Doubiago’s epic suggest, the exploitation of the working poor by big industry, of nature by humans, of women by men, and of Native peoples by white settlers.

Doubiago’s narrator traces her working-class background back several generations, often locating the disenfranchisement of America’s working poor in a troubled relationship to place and to the non-human world. These troubled relationships have very real, material consequences: they manifest physically in people’s bodies. This is why Sharon’s great-grandmother, whose entire family worked in North Carolina’s textile mills, “*witnessed/ seven of her ten children die/ of tuberculosis*” (198) and eventually died from the disease herself. Her granddaughter, the narrator’s mother, was orphaned by the disease as a child and became sick herself as an adult. Passed down from generation to generation, tuberculosis not only functions as a marker of working-class heritage in Doubiago’s proletarian eco-epic; it is also used as a signifier for how social class influences human-nature relations and vice versa:

Once a doctor asked me
if the family was from North Carolina
as if the place itself
tells the story
of swampy, humid lungs
[...]
of the *thing* still carried
in the breath of my children (199; emphasis original)

As the narrator indicates, the “place itself” does not “tell[/] the story” of her maternal family’s long history with pulmonary tuberculosis. However, the vulnerable bodies of her relatives tell the story of “the place” her ancestors lived in (“North Carolina”), just as her children’s bodies tell the story of her family’s working-class background. Working-class bodies here record the frequently precarious relationships of the poor to their places of residence and the long-term effects that acts of environmental injustice committed against the laboring poor can have even after relocation.

On her father’s side of the family, the narrator’s relatives suffered doubly from the interconnected exploitation of working-class people and the land. Sharon’s grandfather worked in the copper mines of Tennessee, which eventually left him and many of his fellow miners unemployed and sick, with “*nothing but the black dust that filled their lungs*” (186; emphasis original). *Hard Country* here evokes another case of

environmental and labor injustice. Yet, the most unsettling passages set in the Copper Basin of Polk County focus not on Sharon's grandfather, but on her grandmother and her son, the narrator's father. As the reader learns, Sharon's paternal family lived in Ducktown, one of the cities located within a roughly 30-km² area of Tennessee that had been stripped almost completely bare of vegetation by the early twentieth century because of logging and the toxic sulfuric emissions of the local swelters (see Mathews and Harden 7).⁵ In the passages focusing on her family's life in the Copper Basin, Doubiago's narrator evokes working-class people's desire for intimate relationships to the more-than-human world, the distortions of these relationships by capitalist exploitation, and the harrowing physical and psychological consequences of those distortions.

One section of the sequence "Headstone," appropriately entitled "The devastation that remains," addresses matters of environmental degradation alongside matters of (re)productive justice by juxtaposing images of a devastated (Mother) Earth with images of the equally devastated body of the narrator's grandmother:

[...] your husband crawling
beneath all borders
deep in the earth's mind
the light on his forehead
leading the way
and five children crawling through you.
You never healed, you told me,
the Edens' head too large (17; emphasis original)

Comparing the act of copper mining to that of giving birth, Sharon represents both as productive and destructive, leaving the Earth/woman with lasting scars and open wounds ("You never healed"). The juxtaposition of her grandmother's husband "crawling/ beneath all borders/ deep in the earth's mind" and of her "five children crawling through [her]" highlights the fact that the South's labor-intensive extraction industry relied on the ongoing re/productivity of "Edens" and other working-class families like them. It not only required working-class people to remain in "this poisoned corner of Tennessee," it required working-class bodies to remain re/productive, despite the horrific working and living conditions in the Copper Basin.

Doubiago's proletarian eco-epic links the environmental and mobility injustice inflicted on the miners and their families to a long-term exposure to pollution on the one hand and to a class-based immobilization on the other. A form of "slow violence" (Nixon 2), this immobilization can be described as a "displacement in place" (Nixon 17) that leaves a community "stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it

⁵ This large-scale clearing was already the second in the region. During a first heyday of copper mining in the Basin between the end of the Civil War and 1879, roughly 130 km² of forest had been cut to produce fuelwood and charcoal for the refinement of the mined copper (Mathews & Harden 6). When the copper mines of Polk County were closed in 1879, some of the local vegetation began to grow back, only to be cut down again during the second heyday of the Copper Basin, which began in 1890.

inhabitable" (19).⁶ The Tennessee Copper Basin is such a place, even if Sharon's father did not realize so as child:

Daddy
who thought the whole earth
without trees, without flowers, without grass
the way it's supposed to be, he thought, death-cracked

blood-red rain-rotted tree-split body-ripped hillskulls

who swam in a green river of cupric chloride
and copperheads (18)

The narrator's paternal family could not move away from the place their own labor helped to destroy because they were dependent on the income that the mining industry offered. They had no choice but to live in a devastated environment made toxic by "a green river of cupric chloride." *Hard Country* denounces these ignoble living conditions. Even more, it acknowledges working-class people's desire to live in places of natural beauty. For Sharon's grandmother, this desire remained tragically unfulfilled, the narrator indicates:

Sometimes, Grandma, you walked to the Georgia border.
I make it up. You must have walked
to North Carolina looking for a tree.
How else did you bear
That poisoned corner of Tennessee? (17)

For the narrator's father, by contrast, a new opportunity for such fulfilment arose when he left the Copper Basin to move to California:

We moved to the country
to start over. [Daddy...]
was climbing a hill and when he came to the crest
the sky went inside him.
Time blew around like a cloud
And he saw the earth for the first time.
She was green, not red. (27)

Representing the father's hike in the "Sierras" (27) as a spiritual experience, this passage describes the moment in which the narrator's father begins to develop an intimate connection to his new place of residence. He not only awakens to the beauty of California's mountains, he also begins to realize the extent of the devastation he was surrounded with as a child. It is only after moving and by moving from one place to

⁶ Nixon uses the terms "displacement in place" (17) and "displacement without moving" (19) interchangeably. Both describe the experience of groups of people, indigenous or non-indigenous, who live in places where "an official landscape is forcibly imposed on a vernacular one" (19). According to Nixon, a "vernacular landscape" is one that "is shaped by the affective, historically textured maps that communities have devised *over generations*" (19, emphasis added). Although Nixon speaks about human-place relations that are produced by long-term inhabitation, which is not necessarily the case with Doubiago's working poor, I would maintain that the term "displacement in place" is still useful for a situation like theirs, in which rapid environmental degradation makes it impossible for a community to create a stable "vernacular landscape" in the first place.

another that the narrator's father is able to overcome the displacement in place suffered by his family and so many working-class people like them.

Doubiago's proletarian eco-epic depicts working-class people who are alienated from the more-than-human world but long for what one might describe as a proletarian sense of place unimpeded by capitalist exploitation and environmental destruction. The sense of place promoted in these passages is often a traditional one that views "the local as the ground for individual and communal identity and as the site of connections to nature that modern society is perceived to have undone" (Heise 9). This emphasis on the local also becomes apparent when Sharon stops at the Eden family graveyard during her travels through the U.S. South. Musing about her early European ancestors, the narrator imagines one of the headstones as an outgrowth of the body buried beneath it. Then she reflects on the radically changed landscape the headstone surveys:

The broad human head
and shoulders rise from the forest floor.
The nose, the mouth, the eyes
look from the ridge out over the land
that has disappeared beneath the waters
of Dale Hollow Lake on the mid-
Tennessee-Kentucky line (7)

The valley near the Tennessee-Kentucky border which the family graveyard overlooks, the reader learns, was flooded, when the completion of a dam in 1943 created "Dale Hollow Lake," a water and flood control reservoir that permanently displaced the narrator's paternal family from the land that their ancestors had inhabited for several centuries. Unlike many later passages in *Hard Country*, this one does not acknowledge the displacement of indigenous people by European settlers from what had originally been Cherokee lands. On the contrary, by using the family graveyard to speculate about a settlement history that reaches beyond official historical records—Doubiago suggests that the first Eden was buried in the graveyard in "1558/ [...] 50 years/ before Jamestown"(7)—this passage reveals the tension that arises when Doubiago's examination of her family's relationship to place comes into conflict with histories of Native American displacement. Rather than addressing this conflict, the gravestone passage speaks to the hierarchy that the nation establishes among (white) settler-citizens of different socio-economic backgrounds. This hierarchy comes to the fore when working-class people's claims to the land go against corporate or state interests, whether these interests be economic or environmental.⁷

⁷ While Dale Hollow Dam was officially built for power generation and flood control, Dale Hollow Lake has since become a widely popular recreational area. Similar projects were undertaken in several other places along the Tennessee and Cumberland River during the 1930s and 40s. T. Crunk's poetry collection *New Covenant Bound* (2010) deals with the consequences of two such "federal land- and water-management projects" (Crunk "Memoriam")—Kentucky Lake and Lake Barley, which today form the Kentucky Woodlands National Wildlife Refuge—and the resulting forced removal of "between 28,000 and 30,000 people" ("Memoriam").

The graveyard passage is not only significant from an ecocritical perspective interested in mobility because it highlights that working-class people have sometimes been displaced for reasons of environmental development and thus been turned into "conservation refugees" (Nixon 18). The fact that Sharon imagines a gravestone as an ancestor's body that "rises[s] from the forest floor" to survey the lost family lands is also significant because it speaks to the narrator's desire for rootedness and belonging. This desire for rootedness and belonging is tied to the kind of human-nature intimacy that is often associated with people who have inhabited and worked a particular piece of land for decades, if not generations. Doubiago's evocation of Wendell Berry's poetry a few lines later (7; see also Doubiago, 259, n. 3) reinforces the ecolocalist idea of rootedness as an environmental ideal. After all, Berry has long been known not only as a regionalist eco-poet who celebrates the "simplicity of farm life" (Hönninghausen 285), but also as a poet-farmer who cultivated his Kentucky farm without the use of modern technology. By promoting this particular brand of land ethics, the beginning of *Hard Country* stands in tension with other passages in Doubiago's epic poem in which the travelling speaker relinquishes ideals of rootedness at least partly, replacing them with what I would describe, in drawing from Christine Gerhardt, as a more "mobile sense of place" (425).

Writing about Emily Dickinson's and Walt Whitman's eco-poetics and questions of mobility, Gerhardt identifies three tactics that imbue the works of these two proto-ecological poets with a mobile sense of place:

the construction of places that are significantly shaped by mobilities, of speakers whose environmental insights are critically informed by their geographical movement, and of broader cultural frameworks characterized by overlapping movements of people, materials, goods, and ideas. (426)

All of these tactics are crucial for Doubiago's eco-poetics. Indeed, when the poet discusses working-class people's relationship to the land, she not only evokes matters of environmental injustice and "displacements in place," she also evokes different histories and experiences of displacement. In other words, she discusses different kinds of materialities—the land, bodies, and the material conditions of production and reproduction that connects them to each other—and different kinds of (im)mobilities. As I will argue, *Hard Country* is thus not merely characterized by an "eco-poetics of mobility" (Gerhardt 425), that is, by "a way of poetic world-making that conceives of natural phenomena and human-nature relationships in particular places as both ecologically suggestive and fundamentally geographically mobile" (425). Rather, it is characterized by a *proletarian eco-poetics of mobility* that reflects on how different kinds of mobilities and cultures of mobility shape (white) working-class peoples' relationships to place and to the more-than-human world.

Sharon Doubiago's Proletarian Eco-poetics of Mobility

Mobility studies scholarship by critics such as John Urry (*Mobilities* 2007), Mimi Sheller (*Mobility Justice* 2018), Peter Adey (*Mobility* 2009), or Tim Cresswell (*On the Move* 2006) emphasizes that (im)mobilities, along with the particular forms and meanings they assume at a given moment, must be analyzed in their specific social, political, and cultural contexts. This perspective also informs Gerhardt's discussion of an "ecopoetics of mobility, which considers "places of mobility" (426), "mobile speakers" (432) and "mobile cultures" (437). Such an approach is also useful when analyzing Doubiago's epic poem *Hard Country*. In the section "Avenue of Giants," for instance, Doubiago's mobile narrator Sharon is driving from Southern California to Oregon when she begins to reflect on how "cars travel/ the mythical highway north/ through iridescent, silver-blue columns/[w]hile loggers haul south/ *Trees of Mystery*" (107, emphasis original). These unassuming lines draw attention to the West coast of the United States as a place that is shaped by different kinds of mobilities, all of which are ecologically significant. The passage mentions U.S. car culture and the human labor involved in the commercial logging of old growth giant redwoods on the coast, which in many places was still underway when Doubiago wrote *Hard Country* (see Newton). In doing so it points to the paradoxical fact that both the efforts to preserve charismatic megaflora such as Sequoias and the exploitation of the environment for leisure by nature parks such as *Trees of Mystery* have been made possible, at least partly, by the rise of automobility.⁸ Finally, by reading this passage with a triple focus on the environment, mobility, and social class, it is revealed that all the industries alluded to here—the logging industry, the transport industry, the automobile industry, and the tourist industry—heavily depend on the mobilization of working-class people for labor and leisure. These industries thus influence working-class people's perspectives on the non-human world as well as a working-class culture of mobility that informs both the experience of Doubiago's narrator and Doubiago's eco-poetics.

A few pages before the narrator starts on her road trip across the United States, Doubiago places a "Prayer for the beginning of a Journey" that also speaks to her eco-poetics of mobility. In order to complete the task the narrator has set for herself, namely to report on "what is seen and heard" (101) in her native country, the traveling poet asks to be plunged "into deepest earth" (101) hoping to re-emerge with a better understanding of the places she visits, of the histories of the people "who have preceded [her]" (101) and of the hopes of "those who come after" (101). The image of going

⁸ Christof Mauch discusses the paradoxical link between discourses of preservation and exploitation in the United States. Suggesting that the relationship of the American people to nature has always been ambivalent and dominated by economic concerns, he uses the example of national parks to argue that while the railway was used to open up the "American wilderness" to the public, it was the rise of automobile tourism during the 1920s and the promotion of nature tourism as a patriotic adventure at the home front during the two World Wars that turned national parks into sites of mass consumption (see esp. 11-13).

underground used in the poem recalls the myth of Persephone, a mythical traveler between places. It also ascribes an explicitly experiential and indeed physical (one might also say environmental) dimension to the act of writing, which the text conceives of as involving intimate, bodily encounters with the more-than-human world. It is this combination of movement and intensive engagement with the materiality, histories, and mythologies of places, this "mov[ing] through deep corridors" (131), as Doubiago puts it elsewhere, that characterizes the proletarian eco-poetics of mobility developed in *Hard Country*.

As she travels the country, engaging with places and their histories, the narrator's white, female, working-class body emerges as an instrument of sense-making, an orientation device indicative of a poetry of witness that values the poet's subjective and yet mobile and thus shifting perspective on the world:

I understand, in this moment of wind
I understand we are each stranded
in our essential Body
[...]
I understand we come from a truth
we each wholly and separately possess
to a particular house and street in time
to tell only the story our body knows
and our tragedy will be
we will not tell it well
because our witnesses
will be telling their stories
[...]
my own story
is understanding our singleness
that I am destined to move my body and time
into the body-time
the story
of Others. (8-9; emphasis original)

While this passage maintains that the narrator's bodily experiences determine her ability to tell some stories better than other ones, it also expresses the narrator's conviction that poets must try to tell stories that go beyond their personal experience. The best way to do so, the narrator suggests, is by "mov[ing one's] body and time/ into the body-time [...] of Others." Movements of the imagination seem to be as important to Doubiago's narrator here as traveling to those places where history happened to engage them with her "essential Body."

Especially those parts of Doubiago's eco-epic that focus on the narrator's travels through the Midwest and the South indicate that Sharon's movements provide her with a more acute sense of how U.S. cultures, national mythologies, and histories of mobility have shaped the country's non-urban environments:

the countless trips back and forth across the country
the road we've grown so old on

animal paths, old Indian foot trails

become superhighways, interstates, buffalo

tearing their way across it, covered wagons
covering it, the flesh
our feet have walked upon, the fear
we still have alone at night
of the land (88)

Linking the narrator's own eastward movement to the westward expansion, the poem implies that whereas the "covered wagons" of the early treks began to disrupt ecologies in the American West, modern "superhighways" and "interstates" are in the process of obliterating them. Despite their ongoing efforts to conquer nature by "covering" the ground with tar and concrete, white working-class Americans like the narrator have been unable to overcome their "fear [...] of the land," which the speaker imagines as "flesh," a metaphor that seems to refer both to a dangerously unstable, living land and to the genocide against indigenous people by which the West was won.

Several poems in *Hard Country* evoke historical migrations and displacements together with environmental histories. The sequence "Heartland," for example, conjures up the catastrophic hygienic conditions on the Oregon Trail, a westward trek that took several hundred thousand emigrants from Missouri and nearby states to the Pacific Coast during the mid-nineteenth century. Rather than presenting these migrations as a heroic feat of brave pioneers, Doubiago describes a "trail to Oregon through/ garbage heaps" with "wells and latrines, too close" that left behind "seepage/ and stink" (119). A later poem, "The Heart of America: Yellowstone," elevates the destructiveness of the westward expansion to even grander proportions by associating it with the movement of tectonic plates. It can be argued that this kind of geological imagery naturalizes the westward movement, deflecting blame and responsibility away from the settlers and thus erasing the devastating effects of settler colonialism. Yet, I would argue that Doubiago primarily uses geological imagery here to emphasize the epochal nature of the European settlement of North America together with its lasting impact. Indeed, voicing a critique of the westward expansion and its underlying ideology, "The Heart of America" suggests that U.S. settler-colonial appetites remain as boundless in Doubiago's time as they were 150 years prior. Just as the "continents" are constantly "sliding" (136) against each other under the surface of Yellowstone, the poem ominously concludes, "America is always coming from the East,/ overriding everything in her path" (137). *Hard Country* thus also explores ambivalences that arise in the relationship of white working-class subjects with the land because they are migrants and settlers.

Doubiago's Proletarian Eco-poetics of Mobility and Settler Colonialism

Doubiago's narrator frequently addresses the migratory histories of her European ancestors. She describes her maternal family as "seatossed here a hundred years before the Revolution" and as a family of "westwalkers" driven by the "mania" of

"starting over" (196). Where Doubiago mentions such family histories of migration without addressing the histories of Native American displacement, a tension arises in *Hard Country*. This tension is especially noticeable when Doubiago employs what Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang describe as "settler moves to innocence" (10), that is, "strategies or positionings that attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege" (10). When Sharon lays claim to several indigenous female ancestors (Doubiago 197), for example, she is using a rhetoric of "settler nativism" (Tuck & Yang 10).⁹ And when she mixes nature imagery and sexual imagery implying that women's bodies are being colonized like the land, she employs "colonial equivocation" (Tuck & Yang 17). Doubiago's use of settler strategies of evasion is problematic because they do the cultural work of legitimizing settler colonialism regardless of the author's intent. Yet, I would argue, her epic poem also works against relieving settler guilt and against evading settler responsibility. One strategy *Hard Country* employs to this effect is addressing the role (white) working-class subjects have played in the dispossession of indigenous people and the devastation of Native American ancestral lands. Another is foregrounding the narrator's own whiteness and the privileges that results from this racialization.

In one passage from the section "Headstone," Doubiago explicitly links the dispossession of indigenous communities and the devastation of Native American ancestral lands to the environmental degradation caused by copper mining:

the place of silence where there are no birds
the place where there are no seeds, only scars
of your having been there
a wide red-rock copper river
named for a chief named Duck
whose trees are gone, who now is lost, whose babies
crying in the kudsu
crawl back onto the hills (19)

Providing yet another powerful description of the "place of silence" in which the narrator's father grew up, these lines depict an environment in which native vegetation has been replaced by "kudsu," an invasive vine that has been spreading uncontrollably in the South ever since it was introduced at the beginning of the twentieth century as a means to revitalize exhausted soils. The absence of birds and trees in this excerpt points to the removal of the Cherokee from the region, while the mention of kudsu points to the "invasion" of indigenous lands by white settlers. At the same time, the quoted passage describes the destruction of indigenous ancestral lands by industrial copper mining. It thus points to the troubled position (white) working-class people such as the members

⁹ Doubiago also claims Native American ancestors for herself. In the afterword to the 1999 reprint of *Hard Country*, she refers to government records that identify two of her great-grandparents as members of the "North Carolina Lumbee" and "Eastern Boundary Qualia Cherokee" (272). While she cherishes this heritage, she also acknowledges the "righteous Native contempt" for culturally non-indigenous, white-identified "wannabes" (272) like herself.

of the narrator's family hold in U.S. history: they are victims of environmental injustice and displacement, yet, they are also perpetrators of environmental destruction and agents of settler-colonial domination, which, as Kyle Whyte notes, is necessarily a form of environmental injustice, because it "disrupts human relationships with the environment" (125).

While the narrator of *Hard Country* sometimes identifies with indigenous peoples and even occasionally assumes their perspective, Sharon usually speaks "specifically as a white woman" (Goodman 455; emphasis original):

and in dreams I am Goldilocks still
wandering through cities and woods
searching for the place
that will fit me
just right, Goldilocks

the ache to be
Bear, little white person
without roots (21; emphasis original)

Like the story of Goldilocks, *Hard Country* is a text about a "little white person" in search for a home ("roots"). The quoted passage suggests that Sharon's "ache" to be Native ("to be/ Bear") is futile but also unnecessary, because as white person she can take up residence wherever she chooses, even if the home in question is already occupied. As Doubiago suggests a few pages earlier, her narrator's "white body" can function "as place/ of sanctuary" (10) and as "city of refuge" (11) until she has found a "place/that will fit [her]/ *just right*" (21; emphasis original). What the narrator gradually realizes during her travels, then, is that being a "little white person" in America means having mobility and settler privilege. Yet, it also means that she is a "betrayal of the Body, the Earth" (256) and a "*consort, abettor, accomplice*" (256; emphasis original; see also Keller, *Form* 57) to the settler-colonial violence committed for her benefit.

By foregrounding the embodied perspectives of a white working-class poet, Doubiago points to a problem that cannot be easily resolved: if a non-indigenous person moves from place to place in search of a home in a settler nation like the United States, especially if she is white, her mobility can never just be a strategy to gain a better understanding of places and their histories because her movement and desire for emplacement also perpetuate settler colonial violence. This is why writing poetry about human-nature relations and (histories of) mobility presents white settler poets like Doubiago/Sharon with a dilemma:

I took a vow to never be a poet
because the art I was taught
is too delicate to sing of genocide.
But what else could I sing
while people were being murdered
in my name? (144)

Settler poets who want to write about the nation can be silent about (settler-colonial) histories of violence, or they can write about them, although the poetic models available to them will be inadequate to the task. Doubiago has resolved "to sing," which is why she must address the history of settler colonialism with whatever language is available to her, not least because, as her narrator asserts, all the people murdered for the sake of the (settler-colonial) nation, "were being murdered/ in [her] name" as well.

Hard Country is not a decolonial text, which would require for it to support, if not explicitly demand a "repatriation of Indigenous land and life" (Tuck & Yang 1). However, Doubiago's proletarian eco-epic is critical of settler colonial violence and thus examines the heritage and the burden that comes with being a white settler. "It was our grandparents who did it" (142), the poet writes in the poem "Wyoming," adding:

Now when we reach for this land
we think of invasions
from Outer Space
because for so long we were
the alien inhuman invaders (142)

Using the plural "we," Doubiago counts her narrator among "the alien inhuman invaders" and thus among those Americans who inflict settler-colonial violence by "reach[ing] for this land." Although the ambiguous use of tenses in the excerpt might indicate that the narrator treats settler colonialism as a matter of the past, Doubiago does consider the relevance of settler colonialism for the nation's present. Trying to understand what her self-positioning as a (descendant of) white settler(s) means, Sharon not only asks, "How did we do it?" but also "How do we bear it?" and, even more importantly, "How do we live now?" (143). Doubiago does not claim to have the answers to these questions. What she vows to do is to continue searching for answers, even if these answers must remain flawed and provisional, by writing poetry that looks to the past to examine the present and, ultimately, to shape more viable futures.

Conclusion

One of the last sections of *Hard Country* looks to the future by returning to several passages from the long poem that also address the three topics at the center of this essay: working-class people's relationships to place, American histories of (im)mobility, and settler colonialism. Revising the passages set in Tennessee's mining country, Doubiago writes:

I tell you everyone I know has one of these stories,
the end of love, the rivers damned, the earth mined,
the gems carried out to make the bomb.
Once I took a vow never to be a poet, but now,
this manmade desert back of us, this 200th anniversary,
how can I not polish and string
these beads of blood and light?
[...]

I tell you your hometown is just symbolic
of what could happen.

the whole earth
without trees, without flowers, without grass, or birds,
the way it's supposed to be, our children will think, plutonium

splashed blood-red rain-rotted tree-split body-ripped hillskulls. (243)

Transposing her description of the Copper Basin's "manmade desert" onto "the whole earth" and shifting attention from the past to the future, Doubiago warns her readers of nothing less than planetary destruction. In order to prevent such a catastrophe, Doubiago ends *Hard Country* with a Whitmanesque gesture that is as grand as it is desperate:

[...] I am the Pelican:
the consumed heart between the White House and the Sun
the human between the male and the female

with only love for hope
look back onto the whole country, its lethal tide
its love of death
its hatred of love
and warn you (258)

Entrusting poetry with the impossible task of bridging differences that may be unbridgeable, Doubiago positions herself as an arbiter for the "whole country" (see also Goodman 460). The poet's "hope" for America is a "love" that acknowledges difference (and indeed *Hard Country* is most effective when it examines these differences carefully), while also transcending it to find common ground based on shared experiences. For many of us, Doubiago's proletarian eco-epic *Hard Country* suggests, one such shared experience (albeit one heavily burdened by history) is the longing for belonging that results from displacement; another is the experience of living on an increasingly damaged planet.

Submission received 1 October 2019

Revised version accepted 30 March 2019

Works Cited

- Adey, Peter. *Mobility*. 1st edition. Routledge, 2009.
- Brennan, Karen, et al. "The Contemporary Long Poem: Feminist Intersections and Experiments." *Women's Studies*, vol. 27, 1998, pp. 507-36.
- Cresswell, Tim. *Mobilizing Place, Placing Mobility: The Politics of Representation in a Globalized World*. Rodopi, 2002.
- Crunk, T. *New Covenant Bound*. The University Press of Kentucky, 2010.

- Crown, Kathleen. "'The mother is the muse H.D. said': Re-Membering the Reader in H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt* and Sharon Doubiago's Early Long Poems." *H.D. and Poets after*. Edited by Donna Krolik Hollenberg. University of Iowa Press, 2000, pp. 75-94.
- Dewey, Anne Day. "The Modern American Long Poem." *The Cambridge Companion to Modern American Poetry*, edited by Walter Kalaidjian. Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- Doubiago, Sharon. "Afterword." *Hard Country*. 1982. Reprinted with a foreword by John Crawford. West end Press, 1999, pp. 267-74.
- . *Hard Country*. 1982. Reprinted with a Foreword by John Crawford. West End Press, 1999.
- . "Mama Coyote Talks to the Boys." *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism*. Edited by Judith Plant. New Society Publishers, 1989, pp. 40-44. Print.
- Downes, Jeremy M. *The Female Homer. An Exploration of Women' Epic Poetry*. University of Delaware Press, 2010.
- Gerhardt, Christine. "Imagining a Mobile sense of Place: Toward an Eco-poetics of Mobility." *Environmental Imaginaries on the Move: Nature and Mobility in American Literature and Culture*. Edited by Christine Gerhardt and Christa Grewe-Volpp. Special Issue of *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, vol. 64, no. 1, 2016, pp. 421-43.
- Goodman, Jenny. "Bearing an Unbearable History: The Adoption of the 'Feminine I' in Sharon Doubiago's *Hard Country*." *Women's Studies*, vol. 27, 1998, pp. 447-64.
- Heise, Ursula K. *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*. Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Hönninghausen, Lothar. "'By Division, Out of Wonder': Gary Snyder, Wendell Berry, and Eco-poetics." *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, vol. 78, no. 2, 1995, pp. 279-291.
- Keller, Lynn. *Forms of Expansion: Recent Long Poems by Women*. University of Chicago Press, 1997.
- . "'To Remember/ Our Dismembered Parts': Sharon Doubiago and the Complementary Woman's Epic." *American Literary History*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1992, pp. 305-328.
- Mathews, Louise, and Carol Harden. "150 Years of Environmental Degradation and Reclamation in the Copper Basin, Tennessee." *Southeastern Geographer*, vol. 39, no. 1, 1999, pp. 1-21.
- Mauch, Christof. "Das Janusgesicht des American Dream: Natur und Kultur in der US-amerikanischen Geschichte." *Beiträge zum Göttinger Umwelthistorischen Kolloquium 2007-2008*, edited by Bernd Herrmann. Universitätsverlag Göttingen, 2008, pp. 1-21.
- Newton, Lisa H. "The Chainsaw of Greed: The Case of Pacific Lumber." *Business & Professional Ethics Journal*, vol. 8, no. 3, 1989, pp. 29-61.
- Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press, 2011.

- Schweizer, Bernard. "Introduction: Muses with Pens." *Approaches to the Anglo and American Female Epic, 1621–1982*, edited by Bernard Schweizer, Ashgate Publishing, 2006, pp. 1-16.
- Sheller, Mimi. *Mobility Justice: The Politics of Movement in an Age of Extremes*. Verso, 2018.
- Tokarczyk, Michelle M. "Toward Imagined Solidarity in the Working-Class Epic: Chris Llewellyn's *Fragments from the Fire* and Diane Gilliam Fisher's *Kettle Bottom*." *Women's Studies*, vol. 43, 2014, pp. 865–891.
- Tuck, Eve, and K. Wayne Yang. "Decolonization is not a Metaphor." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* vol. 1, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1-40.
- Urry, John. *Mobilities*. Polity, 2007.
- Whyte, Kyle. "Settler Colonialism, Ecology, and Environmental Injustice." *Environment and Society: Advances in Research* no. 9, 2018, pp. 125-144.