Transgressive Roots in Roman and Indigenous Conceptions of Land

In the fifth book of *De Lingua Latina*, Varro compares the etymological links between words to tree roots that burrow beyond their own territory and into neighboring fields (5.13). This metaphor offers fertile ground for an analysis of Roman land surveying, which I argue used both linguistic and physical boundaries to control and redefine conquered territories. In this paper, I place Varro into conversation with Siculus Flaccus, a 1st-2nd century C.E. Roman land surveyor, whose treatise *De Conditionibus Agrorum* addresses both the etymologies of key terms—such as *colonia* and *territoria*—and the use of foreign flora to mark Roman colonial boundaries. I argue that Flaccus' etymological interpretations, like Varro's tree roots, demonstrate a slippage of meaning that undermines Roman attempts to establish rigid legal and cultural boundaries. By deriving *territoria* (territory) from *territi* (frightened) (Sic. Flac., *De Cond. Agr.* 104.11-16 from Campbell, 2000), since territories involve the frightening off of previous inhabitants, Flaccus emphasizes the fear-driven nature of Roman expansion and land seizure. This contrasts with Varro's interpretation of the term as linked to *teritur* "to be trodden" (Varro, *Ling.*, 5.21).

Siculus Flaccus' commentary on the use of foreign trees as boundary markers literalizes this metaphor. In the context of Roman land survey, olive trees, for example, serve as "subtle hints inserted into the landscape, whose spatial message can be deciphered by a trained eye" (Klein, 34). These trees are not only functional tools of surveying, but also symbols of ownership and control, signaling the boundaries between native and non-native land. "In other words, the tree is not likely to be forgotten because it is itself a reminder; it speaks in the tacit language of land surveyors about a hidden water source or a boundary between two properties" (Klein, 34). The use of foreign flora in these roles emphasizes the fragility and permeability of Roman territorial control, as these plants, like the slippages in etymology, transgress the lines between inside and outside, native and foreign. The Roman use of these foreign plants also demonstrates concerted engagement in "botanical

imperialism," the "appropriation, control, and economic use of plant cultigens" for imperial purposes (Broswimmer, 3).

This aspect of Roman surveying resonates with Indigenous experiences in North America, as described by Robin Wall Kimmerer in *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Kimmerer writes of the Potawatomi people's forced removal from their homeland, where their native trees—hickories, walnuts, and butternuts—were integral to their identity as a community (Kimmerer, 12). The U.S. government, through policies of Indian removal and land allotment, sought to sever Indigenous people's ties to their land, parallelling the Roman imposition of foreign markers to redefine the territories of conquered peoples. The contrast between trees as markers of memory and identity, and trees as tools of colonial disruption, reveals deeper cultural and political tensions mirrored in both the North American and Mediterranean cases.

In both contexts, trees serve as symbols of cultural memory and identity, as well as tools of colonial disruption and domination. Roman land surveyors recorded and archived their work, creating copper or bronze maps—*formae*—to document the boundaries they imposed: "surveyors made copper maps of the plots they allocated and placed them in the city's archive… for safekeeping as a legal document" (Klein, 36). The imposition of foreign elements on native landscapes mirrors the efforts of settler-colonial policies to commodify indigenous lands, transforming them from communal spaces into private property. As Kimmerer notes, "In the settler mind, land was property, real estate, capital, or natural resources. But to our people, it was everything: identity, the connection to our ancestors, the home of our nonhuman kinfolk, our pharmacy, our library, the source of all that sustained us" (Kimmerer, 17).

By exploring how both Roman and Indigenous landscapes were manipulated through the imposition of foreign elements—whether linguistic, botanical, or legal—this paper works to understand the ways in which transgressive forces challenge imperial and colonial systems of control. Siculus Flaccus and Kimmerer both reveal the resilience of cultural memory, even in the face of

displacement and fragmentation, as trees become not only boundary markers but agents in the construction of identity and belonging.

Keywords: Varro, Siculus Flaccus, Robin Wall Kimmerer, Etymology, Land Surveying, Colonialism, Identity, Memory

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