

Desert Sex: Inhabiting an Erotic Earth

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American authors Katie Lee, Ellen Meloy, and Terry Tempest Williams each write about explorations of desert landscapes that involve sexual encounters with the desert itself. Emerging from the American southwest, their books describe erotic connectivity as an integral part of ecologic cycles, a self-dismantling means of widening human subjectivity, a pathway to spiritual connection with place, and a generator of passionate care for the earth. In joining a stormy waterfall “orgy,” exchanging pleasures with a saddle of rock, and being seduced by the sex organs of plants, these women develop, as Meloy puts it, “a fierce bond between the body and this piece of earth” (“A Field Guide to Brazen Harlotry”). In this paper, I bring Lee, Meloy, and Williams into conversation with several contemporary theorists—in particular, two Deleuze-influenced thinkers, Rosi Braidotti and Elizabeth Grosz—who consider the work of desire upon ecological and ethical lives. Together, these writings suggest that human cultivation of erotic relationship with the earth is a method of movement toward posthuman subjectivity, world-connected spirituality, and planetary care.

In writing the erotic connections between human bodies, earth bodies, and the sacred, these desert lovers and activists make relationality sexual, sacrality relational, and sexuality sacred. “Intoxication seems the purist form of worship,” writes Meloy, as the scent of Russian olive holds her in “holy trance.” Reflecting in particular on the ways that

religiosity and desire work together in these desert encounters, I explore the religious language employed by the desert authors alongside traditions of sacred eros and the call for earthy spiritual frameworks coming from secular thinkers like Braidotti. I also consider the vast, complex, sensorily extreme landscape of desert itself—the setting for the emergence of the Abrahamic religions and a traditional site of spiritual discipline and mystical experience—as it provides experimental ground and inspiration for new stories that link the kinship of life to the eroticism of life to the sacredness of life.