SAIL

Studies in American Indian Literatures

Series 2 Volume 10, Number 3 Fall 1998

Almanac of the Dead

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Listening to the Spirits: An Interview with Leslie Marmon Silko

Ellen Arnold

The following is a portion of an interview conducted on August 3, l998, at the kitchen table of Leslie Silko's ranch house outside Tucson, in the midst of her extended family of horses, dogs, cats, birds, and one big rattlesnake. On that table is a manuscript copy of Gardens in the Dunes, *the new novel Silko has just completed, which will be published early in 1999. At the time of the interview, I was about halfway through the manuscript.*[1]

Gardens in the Dunes *is a richly detailed and intensively researched historical novel set at the end of the nineteenth century. It focuses on the lives of Sister Salt and Indigo, two young Colorado River Indian sisters of the disappearing Sand Lizard tribe, who are separated when Indigo is taken away to boarding school in California. Too old for school, Sister Salt is sent to the Reservation at Parker, but escapes to make her way among the construction camps of the closing Arizona frontier. Indigo runs away from boarding school and is taken in by Hattie Abbott Palmer, a scholar of early Church history, and her botanist husband Edward, Easterners who have come West to look after the Palmer citrus groves in California. Thinking Indigo is an orphan, the Palmers take her with them on a Summer tour of East Coast and European homes and gardens belonging to wealthy family members and friends.*

Taught early by her Mama and Grandma Fleet the intricacies and pleasures of gardening in the sand dunes along the Colorado before her people were driven out, Indigo is an attentive and appreciative observer.

Through her we experience elaborate mannerist gardens in Italy, English landscape gardens, and their American interpretations on the estates of the New England Robber Barons. Amidst this lush and loving description, Silko unfolds a gripping narrative of intrigue, betrayal and revenge, loss, reunion, and renewal.

Ellen Arnold (**EA**): In *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*, you described how *Almanac of the Dead* originated in a series of photographs you took that came together and made a story. How did *Gardens in the Dunes* begin?

Leslie Marmon Silko (**LMS**): *Gardens in the Dunes* goes way back. Somewhere in my papers I had a sketch for a story about the gladiolus man. It was supposed to be a short story about a man who, when he was young, went to Sherman Institute in Riverside, and at the school they taught him how to cultivate gladiolus. He goes back home and on a piece of family land plants the gladiolus, and then the clanspeople get really angry because it's not a food crop, it's a flower. The idea being that this person is just so lost and in love with these flowers and their colors, even though they're ridiculous and useless. But of course, that comes head on with the needs for food and economy. And so for years and years, I've intended to write this short story called "The Gladiolus Man."

Then I got interested in gardens and gardening. I've always tried to grow things. At Laguna, I could have a vegetable garden. Since I came to Tucson, it's a real challenge to try to get something to grow down here. I do have the datura growing around the house. Here in Tucson there's the Native Seeds Search group. They try to take care of heirloom seeds, and seeds of indigenous plants and indigenous crops. Since I've come to Tucson, I started to think more about the old time food and the way people grew it, not just in the Pueblo country, but in this area, in the Sonoran Desert.

So I'd been thinking about gardens, but I guess what cinched it is that everyone was complaining—not everyone, but some of the moaners and groaners about my work, who think that Chicano or Native American literature, or African American literature, shouldn't be political. You know, easy for those white guys to say. They've got everything, so their work doesn't have to be political. So, I was like, oh, okay, so you want something that's not political. Okay, I'm going to write a novel about gardens and flowers. And so that's what I thought, though I should have known that even my idea of the gladiolus man, my character who planted flowers instead of food, was very political. I'd always wondered too, why

seed catalogues are so seductive, and plant catalogues. I was real interested in the language of description and the common names of flowers. So anyway, I just started reading about gardens.

I had this idea about these two sisters, and I knew right away that they weren't Pueblo people. I knew that they were from the Colorado River. There are some Uto-Aztecan groups mixed in with the Yuman groups over there. These were some of the people that lived in some of the side canyons on the Colorado River. So many of the cultures along the Colorado River were completely wiped out. There's no trace of them left. And it was done by gold miners and ranchers. They didn't even have to use the Army on them. Just the good upstanding Arizona territory, the good old boys, slaughtered all these tribes of people that are just gone forever. So I decided that my characters would be from one of these remnant, destroyed, extinct groups. They'd be some of the last of them.

So I started writing, but then it wasn't too long before I realized how very political gardens are. Though my conscious self had tried to come up with an idea for a non-political novel, I had actually stumbled into the most political thing of all—how you grow your food, whether you eat, the fact that the plant collectors followed the Conquistadors. You have the Conquistadors, the missionaries, and right with them were the plant collectors. When I started reading about the orchid trade, then suddenly I realized, but it was too late then! I realized that this was going to be a really political novel too.

In *Almanac of the Dead* you have the mention of the Ghost Dance. I didn't realize that this [indicating Gardens manuscript] would also be wanting to look at the Messiah, at Jesus Christ of the Americas. There are many different Jesuses. That was another thing I started reading about, the Gnostic Gospels—Elaine Pagel's wonderful book, *The Gnostic Gospels*. She was in the first group of MacArthur fellows with me, and they called us back to Chicago in 1982 for a reunion. Later she had her publisher send me a copy of her book, *The Gnostic Gospels*. Well, I was deep in the middle of writing *Almanac of the Dead*, and that book sat on my shelf for years. So recently I wrote her a letter and thanked her for it, and I said, oh, and by the way, I wrote a whole novel partly because of your book. I started to realize that there are lots of different Jesus Christs, and the Jesus or the Messiah of the Ghost Dance and some of the other sightings of the Holy Family in the Americas were just as valid and powerful as other sightings and versions of Jesus. And I didn't realize until just recently that there are all kinds of Celtic traditions of Saint Joseph and Mary being in England and Ireland. There's always been the Messiah and the Holy

Family that belong to the people. And so that got mixed in too.

Lots of things came together then, and maybe that's what always happens when I write. You can see this idea from years ago, about the Gladiolus Man—my grandfather, Henry C. Marmon, went to school at Sherman Institute, and the early part where Indigo talks about the Alaska girls who came and got sick and died, Grandpa told me that. That really happened. So a lot of what this is, is a kind of accretion, a gathering slowly of all these things I've been interested in, I've heard about, I've read about, a book someone's given me.

And then, in 1994, I went to Germany to promote the German translation of *Almanac of the Dead*, which is more copy edited and more technically correct than the English version, because for my German translator, Bettina Münch, it was a labor of love.

EA: I can imagine *Almanac* in German. It seems like German would be a really good language for it.

LMS: Yes. And she's got it in there! Anyway, my German publisher, Rogner and Bernhard, arranged for Bettina to travel with me, and I flew off to Leipzig. That was our first stop, old East Germany. In that very church building where the Democracy movement, the movement that made the Wall finally fall down, began, I did my first reading. And then Bettina would read in German, and it was just beautiful—in English and in German. It was standing room only. So the energy there was... I had no preconceived notions, but I have German ancestors. I could just feel that in that realm, those ancestors are not like human beings who differentiate, that my German ancestors were right there for me. I didn't expect it. I guess that's when you're most open to it, when you're not consciously thinking about something. Then those things can happen.

So not only were my German ancestor spirits really close, but the young East German women were just devastated at that point, by what the change, what unification meant. They lost day care, they lost jobs, they lost the right to terminate pregnancies they didn't want, so their world was collapsing. They'd had all these dreams about what unification would mean, and now they were just being crushed. Leipzig was being colonized by huge construction cranes to build skyscrapers. Capitalism was trampling them and crunching them under its boot. I had so many German women come up to me and say they felt hopeless, they felt completely despondent over the betrayal of what they had hoped unification would be, and then they read *Almanac* and they found hope in *Almanac*. And I was like, Yes! I wrote that novel to the world, and I was thinking about the Germans, I was thinking about the Europeans. I believe that the

Pueblo people, the indigenous people of the Americas, we're not only Indian nations and sovereign nations and people, but we are citizens of the world. So I had all these people come up to me and say, Yes! And the ancestor spirits were there, and it was almost like they were creating. ... There was a medium, a field, of positive and real communication. And so Berlin, same thing—standing room only. It was wonderful. Munich. And then, Zurich.

Zurich. The book tour was in the Spring, so it was around the time of Fasching, Festival, their Spring rites. Right at sundown I was walking with the publishing rep through the narrow downtown streets of Zurich, with all the revelers and parades they do for Lent. It's like a European Mardi Gras, but of course it's pagan. And so I'm loving it, and I think that's one of the reasons that maybe I could feel the German ancestor spirits out, because even though they consciously don't know why they're doing it, the Europeans when they dress up in their masks and go around like that, that's an old rite. And even though they consciously aren't aware of it, they're still doing what they're supposed to be doing. All of a sudden, we were walking down the street, and up ahead there were these giant blackbirds. And they moved through the streets in this kind of silence. Someone who might want to rationalize it might say, oh you just saw another group of the people masked, but the whole feeling of it, the silence, and watching them move through the street, was like a kind of apparition. So I saw this apparition of these raven or blackbird beings move through, and when we got to where they had been, we couldn't see them anywhere. We just found one little black feather.

So here I am on book tour, and what a time it was! There was some kind of heightened energy, and it had to do with the old spirits, and that they would come. That they didn't care about where you had come from, that they don't make those kinds of boundaries. I felt welcomed. I felt at home. And then two years later, when I spent three weeks in Italy with my friend Laura Coltelli, who's also my Italian translator, there were blackbirds that were there with me. And I also have blackbirds who live here with me. So there's something about blackbirds.

When I came back, my whole experience of Germany and Zurich was just like, whoa. I also have ancestors from Scotland, and I've always been interested in their old stones, and of course I'm a stone worshipper. I've got stones around, you know. You're a stone worshipper. Lots of stone worshippers! And so, by golly, once I knew that Indigo was going to go to Europe, I knew that she was going to see gardens in Europe, and I knew that something of what's alive there, that there's a kind of continu-

ity. ... I mean Europe is not completely Christianized. The missionaries were not completely successful. There is a pagan heart there, and the old spirits are right there. When I went to Rome, I saw the old cat cult. The old Mediterranean cat cult never died out. It's there in Rome and all these old ladies and old men feed cats, and the cats look at you, and you look at the cats, and the cats say, this is all ours. So going into *Gardens of the Dunes*, I had a tremendous sense of the presence of the oldest spirit beings right there in Europe, and that lots of Europeans, even the ones that don't know it, are still part of that. As hard as Christianity tried to wipe it out, and tried to break that connection between the Europeans and the earth, and the plants and the animals—even though they've been broken from it longer than the indigenous people of the Americas or Africa—that connection won't break completely. That experience was so strong that I wanted to acknowledge it a little.

EA: So in a way, you can see *Almanac* giving birth to *Gardens in the Dunes*, by taking you to those places.

LMS: By taking me to those places. Exactly. It was with the *Almanac* where I first realized that there are these spirit entities. Time means nothing to them. And that you can have a kind of relationship with them. They rode me pretty hard in *Almanac of the Dead*. But then I learned not to be afraid of them, to go ahead and trust them. Yeah, I was meant to go there. And the spirits were waiting there, probably called around by *Almanac*. But by then, I was also able to see fully the whole of it, that there was so much positive energy. And the old spirits that made me write *Almanac*, they meant well, even though two-thirds of the way through, they're about to ...

EA: They're about to do us all in!

LMS: They're about to do everyone in, me included, believe me! You can really see how this grows out of that experience.

EA: What that gives me a sense of too, is that we want to describe a lot of the things we do as "remnants" that don't have the same meaning anymore, without thinking about the fact that there are things that are living through us, even when we aren't consciously aware of it.

LMS: Exactly.

EA: That we're being used to keep these things alive.

LMS: Exactly. And then as usual, I start out with a conscious idea of what I think I'm doing, and then the Messiah came into the novel. The garden is so important in early Christianity, in the Bible, and gardens are so important to the Koran. In the three great monotheistic religions—Judaism, Moslem, and Christianity—garden imagery is real important.

Once I had my Sand Lizard sisters down on the Colorado River, I remembered from my reading for *Almanac of the Dead* that in l893 there was a Ghost Dance at Kingman (now in my novel, I fudge and move it over to Needles). Then as soon as the Ghost Dance comes into the novel, I know that Jesus and the Messiah are in there, and then I know the Gnostic Gospels have to be in there. And then my whole sense that in Europe, there's the corporate church, that kind of Christianity, and then there's this other Jesus. Jesus would have a fit, just like I wrote in *Almanac of the Dead*, if he could see what his followers did.

So there's very much a connection [between the novels], even though the effect on the reader is very different. *Gardens in the Dunes* is meant as a reward, something less rigorous for the reader. If you make it all the way through *Almanac*, it makes you strong. But it's like one of those stronger remedies. You do have to tell some people, hey, if it starts to bother you, put it down. Rest. Take it easy. Every now and then I'll run into someone who, by god, read *Almanac of the Dead* in three days, just read it. And I'm like, whoa, isn't it toxic to do that?

EA: One of the reasons I had so much trouble reading it is because the Los Angeles riots happened right in the middle of my reading it, and I could hardly pick the book up without feeling like it was coming to life all around me. It was very frightening.

LMS: The book seemed to know that. Even the urgency to go ahead and finish it. I look now and I see thats and whiches that shouldn't be there in *Almanac*, but it was like those little spirits who rode me, they said: your vanity? Your vanity about how your prose looks on the page, your vanity about wanting to satisfy the Ph.D. students and readers, your vanity? Your vanity! When I tried to get it finished and published within two or three years like the publishers wanted, the old spirits said, your vanity? You want to do something on a schedule like that? No, it's our book. You swallow all your hopes and pretensions. You swallow all your vanity. And then the urgency, when it kept saying, it's about time, it's about time, time coming, time, it has to go out, your vanity, no. And so I did that, and then Simon & Schuster chose November 2, 1991 as the pub date. November 2 is the Day of the Dead. November 2 was the day in 1977 that the doctors told me that I would probably die in surgery. And so the thing about time, and the urgency, and the spirits saying no, this thing goes out now, and then how when you were reading it—everything about the *Almanac* has been really eerie. When I got done with it, Simon & Schuster couldn't have known or timed it, they just arbitrarily brought it out on November 2. They don't know what day that is.

EA: So that is actually the day that they brought it out?
LMS: It's called the pub date, it's a literal date that's connected with all books, it's like a birth date. And that was its day. The other thing that was interesting about *Almanac of the Dead* is that it's ISBN number has 666 in it. I love that! [Laughter] I didn't ask for that! I didn't ask for November 2! And of course the ultimate thing that it did—January 1, 1994, I pick up a Sunday paper, and it says that the Zapatistas in the mountains outside of Tuxtla Gutierrez. ... Then the hair on my neck stood up.
EA: Mine too! And everybody else who'd read it.
LMS: It went out over the internet. It blew people away. Well that's why, it had a sense of time. The spirits had a sense of time and things about dates and time. It's like *Almanac of the Dead* did everything that it wanted, that's how it's been. And it didn't care about editing or copy editing, and it did not care about my vanity. It did not care about being shaped into a more traditional novel. Some people have said, oh *Almanac of the Dead*, you could break it into four or five of that kind of fiction that's so popular, the quick read or the page turner. But that's not it at all. I was not allowed to. I completely was taken over, and everything about it was meant to be. The spirits just wanted it out there. And so I let go of it, and then that's what happened in terms of getting that particular ISBN number, that pub date, for you to be reading it when the riots happened, for the Zapatistas. ... They knew, and I knew somehow, now that I can look back.

What's interesting is Commander Marcos [spokesman for the Zapatistas] went to the mountains in 1980, and that's when I started to have transmissions. I started to have to spontaneously write down things from the *Almanac*. So there's a real parallel there, which works on that plane that extends across the universe, where stuff travels faster than the speed of light.[2] So the *Almanac*, everything about the way *Almanac* has gone out into the world and since then, is so spooky.
EA: In *Almanac*, the Reign of the Death's Eye Dog is a male reign. It seems that what you see in *Almanac* is the ultimate of a patriarchal system. *Gardens* seems so very female. Were you consciously balancing that?
LMS: No not consciously, though very soon I became conscious of it. And then I thought, well, yeah. Of course there are males in this female world, like Big Candy, that I was interested in.
EA: But they're very different men from the ones who were in *Almanac*!
LMS: The *Almanac* men, everything in *Almanac*, isn't quite realism. This [*Gardens*] is more going back to a kind of literary realism. No, almost all

of those characters are so intense or extreme as to be almost mythical. This [*Gardens*] was to try to explore and see if I could make a book so that, if you had a scale and you put *Almanac* on this side, they could balance out. And I think *Gardens* explores dimensions of history and has a span almost like the span in *Almanac*, but it's just a different way of looking at it again.

While I was writing *Almanac*, I got an invitation to go to Gettysburg College. I thought maybe I shouldn't go, because I was working on *Almanac*, and I was trying to get it done. And then I thought, oh well, I'll go. I took *Almanac* with me. I took the manuscript I was working on with me. And do you know, I'll never try to go to bed and sleep at Gettysburg. Those dead souls and spirits, they were just overwhelming. And that's where the part of *Almanac of the Dead* came from, where some character says that the Civil War was the blood payment for slavery in the U.S. Actually the war was only a partial payment. That part comes from spending that night there, and do you know, I lost part of the manuscript of *Almanac of the Dead* there. It stayed in Gettysburg. It was a section about Zeta, Lecha's sister in *Almanac of the Dead*. It was so precious, and somehow I managed to lose it. It disappeared there. Oh boy, I won't go back to Gettysburg. Those big battlefields like that, and those burial grounds, and those things that aren't supposed to be there. ... Gettysburg was very powerful, and I doubly won't go back to Gettysburg now. There are so many souls and spirits howling and crying in the Americas, not just indigenous ones.

EA: I haven't finished the manuscript yet, but one of the things that I feel really strongly in *Gardens of the Dunes* is the artificiality of the lines we draw between people, between peoples and nations. The battles and the Messiahs, these are the kinds of things individual people share in common. If you set them apart from the politics behind them, people in Europe and the indigenous peoples in the Americas have a lot more in common than they have that divides them.

LMS: Exactly! And those who would make the boundary lines and try to separate them, those are the manipulators. Those are the Gunadeeyah, the destroyers, the exploiters. I'm glad that comes through, because that's what I was trying to do, to get rid of this idea of nationality, borderlines, and drawing lines in terms of time and saying, oh well, that was back then. And because I felt that in Germany. I felt that when I was talking with those women. It's because I've experienced it. And the more you really feel it and believe in it, the more angry you get at these manipulators who would divide people. Our human nature, our human spirit, wants

no boundaries, and we are better beings, and we are less destructive and happier. We can be our best selves as a species, as beings with all the other living beings on this earth, we behave best and get along best, without those divisions.

EA: Something that disturbs me is that much of the literary criticism that's written about Native American literature perpetuates those divisions. It's always Native Americans versus EuroAmericans, and it falls out that way even in literary interpretations. People have to make those political distinctions and draw those lines even when they're writing about novels.

LMS: Right. I really wanted to dismantle that in this novel.

EA: And you'll get criticism for that, don't you think?

LMS: Oh, I'm sure I'll get all kinds of criticism.

EA: Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, for example, criticized *Almanac* for not working towards tribal sovereignty.[3] And I can imagine that some people would object to this book for bringing Indians and Europeans together in a way that I don't think has happened in a Native American novel.

LMS: No, I don't think it's happened before. I can foresee the possibility of the greatest of changes, but they can only happen if the people from the South work at it, and all the people here, including the non-Indian. Everyone would have to take part. It would be working toward what the continents and the old tribal spirits and people believe. Even for the old folks I grew up with, the Indian way is to learn how a person is inside their heart, not by skin color or affiliation. That criticism grows out of more of a non-Indian way of looking at things. That's why the indigenous people welcomed the newcomers. They didn't draw lines like that.

EA: They were bringing new things in.

LMS: Yes. The old folks who showed me and taught me that way of seeing the world, they're not here now to defend that way of seeing. But it really was an inclusive one. In the old way, the old folks would say, just like in *Almanac*, all of those who love the earth and want to do this are welcome. That's the old, old way. That attitude about nationalism comes in much later, that's much more a European way of looking at things. The truth of the matter is, if you really want to think about the retaking of the Americas, it has to be done with the help of everybody. It has to be done with the help of the people from the South. Everyone has to agree. And the retaking of the Americas is not literal, but it's in a spiritual way of doing things, getting along with each other, with the earth and the animals. It would be for all of us.

It's true that the way the old folks looked at things got them into

trouble, because they welcomed these newcomers. But that was how they saw the world, and it was the right way. Just because everyone wants to fall in and draw lines and exclude, well, that's the behavior of Europeans. A lot of that's been internalized. A lot of the times when my work is attacked, it's attacked by people who aren't aware of how much they've internalized these European attitudes. The old time people were way less racist and talked way less about lines and excluding than now. So that that way of being in the world and in the Americas is not forgotten, we've got to be reminded of how the people used to see things. And if being yourself gets you into trouble, which it did, if being so inclusive and welcoming of strangers didn't turn out well, the old prophecies tell us that it still doesn't matter, and it's all going to be okay. That's the only way that it can be, including everybody. That's the only way that the kind of peace and harmony that this earth of the Americas wants is going to happen.

So yeah, I can see making everyone mad. I can see all the tribal people could be mad, and all different kinds of Christians will be mad. Actually this novel could be more dangerous for me and more trouble than *Almanac of the Dead* was, for just those reasons. And I'm aware of it, but I refuse to forget how generous, how expansive, how inclusive the way of the old people was, of seeing the world and of seeing human beings. You can see it being eroded. Even the racism that came into the reservations, brought in by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and then the next thing you know, somebody thinks that's Indian tradition.

EA: When you read from the novel in Montgomery,[4] you said that you had invented the Sand Lizard people. Why did you choose to do that rather than to draw on a real people?

LMS: Because I didn't really feel like I knew any of the Colorado River people that are left. I know a little bit, and I've met people from the different Colorado River tribes, but I hadn't lived that experience of being a Yuma or a Mojave. I also wanted them to be gone. Lots of people were wiped out and gone forever, and lots of people had to be the last ones. That's where a lot of the bitterness and negative attitudes against white people come from, from the terrible crimes that were committed. I didn't want to mitigate or lessen. I wanted them to be from a group that was completely obliterated. But also I wanted the artistic and ethical freedom to imagine them any way I wanted.

EA: So you wouldn't have people jumping on you about ethnographic accuracy?

LMS: I didn't want anyone to think that what I said about the Sand Lizard

people was factual. I wanted that freedom. I did do lots and lots of reading about the Colorado River area and the tribes and the people, and then I tried to imagine a people who had characteristics that made others remark that they were different—characteristics that, in being who they were, it set them up to be destroyed. Maybe that's what happens here to me as a writer. You just have to go ahead and be a human being, be who you are. So I was interested in imagining a group that, when they were fighting, instead of obliterating their opponents if they were winning, they would stop. I love that.

EA: Is the canyon of the Sand Lizards a real place, or did you create it?

LMS: I just created it. I can just see it. I just know it. It's based on a spring on family property south of Laguna.

EA: So this is the same Dripping Spring that's in *Ceremony*?

LMS: Yeah, that's the same spring. It's the same spring in *Gardens of the Dunes*, but I've added some big dunes. And of course I moved it, but there is that sandstone geological formation that makes springs come out of cracks that does occur all the way across north central Arizona and New Mexico. There are places like that all along the Colorado River in the side canyons. The shallow cave and the snake that's there. You're right. That's what I did. I took that spring. That spring's not in *Almanac* though. But guess what? *Almanac* ends with the snake—I didn't mean to, I didn't plan this, I shouldn't tell you about the ending—but there's a snake at the end [of *Gardens*]!

EA: I'm not surprised!

LMS: I was! I wrote it, I finished it, and then I stepped back, and I was like, wow! I did it again. I didn't mean to, I didn't plan it, but that's how it is.

EA: Speaking of snakes, I walked down and looked at the wall [of the building on Stone Avenue where Silko painted her snake mural while she was writing *Almanac of the Dead*. Since then the building has been sold, and the new owner has painted over the mural.][5] The paint is very thick, but it's beginning to peel off right in the middle. What's underneath it is the whitewash, and you can see a little faint color under the whitewash. So it's beginning to peek out.

LMS: What happened is that after [the mural was painted over], there's a group of people stalking the guy who destroyed it. They really tried, you know. The TV station did a piece on it. The whole neighborhood tried. It's so sad. It isn't like it was hated, and everyone wanted to get rid of it. So I don't feel bitter, like I didn't have any help or anything. It's just that the destroyers—it's a guy with money.

EA: It's the private property thing.
LMS: It's private property. They even took it to City Council, and that's what they [the Council] said.

I was working along on *Almanac of the Dead*, and I'd reached a point where I wasn't sure. I was right at a midpoint, and Mecham got elected [Governor of Arizona], and I got really angry because he called black people pickaninnies, and he was elected with 27 per cent of the vote. I wrote *Almanac* inside that building. So when Mecham first got elected, I did this to the side of the building [indicates photograph]. I made it look like graffiti, so that my landlord wouldn't get into trouble. I was just so outraged. It started out: Arizona Democrats are you dead?
EA: So your landlord at that time was sympathetic.
LMS: Right. He let me do that. We left it up until the sonofabitch Mecham was recalled. As soon as people rallied around, as soon as we got rid of Mecham, then he painted over the graffiti. So one morning I drove up, and I didn't know what I was going to do [about *Almanac*]. I've always been a frustrated visual artist, and I always have paint, and I had paint down there inside my writing office. That morning I drove up and I could see a snake, and then I knew that the snake had the skulls in it.

Like everything that I write or create, it just kept growing, and I left off the novel. I came to the middle of the novel, Mecham got elected, I freaked out, and I didn't know what I was going to do. I didn't know what happened in *Almanac*. But of course, the spirits are writing *Almanac*, not me. I decided if I could successfully complete the mural, I could by god finish the novel too. So I stopped writing *Almanac* for awhile, until I got the mural along. I worked and worked, and when I got it to the point where it was pretty much finished, I went back inside and finished *Almanac of the Dead*. The whole Mexico section, it all came. It all came.

This was its first incarnation [points out another photo]. The early incarnation, the blue snake, doesn't have the hummingbird and spider. It was chosen one of the best new pieces of outdoor art in 1988. It was up for about six years, and it was so gratifying. You know there are those graffiti guys, taggers and gangs, and they respected it so much, they never laid a hand on it. They would put their tags nearby it, and people would write me notes in Spanish and thank me for it. It lived out there for years and nobody ever harmed it. The sunlight and pollution worked on it, but you know, when you make a piece of art and you put it out in public, it's completely defenseless. It's just there. And yet it was so loved. The taggers didn't tag it, and the graffiti guys left it alone, and there are other outdoor murals in Tucson where right away—you know, that public art,

real bland, don't offend anyone—those guys come. That's not art, that stuff they call public art. So anyway, all these years it stays up, and then in the Fall of '93, I decided it needed to be freshened. At Laguna they keep the same outline, but they sometime will use different paint [shows another photo].

EA: Oh, it's red!

LMS: So by god, this time the snake was red. In November I paint it red, finish in December, and in January the Zapatistas rise up! And then I freshened up more. It took me years to get the whole thing done.

EA: [Reading from newspaper account] "Leslie Silko, an award winning writer, began small with painted graffiti."

LMS: "This was a good year for public art. ... But other artists took funding and commissioning into their own hands." Yeah, I did it all with my own money. These public artists that have to have approval and money, the work has to be so bland. I did it all on my own, because of course, no one would ever okay it for public art, no one would ever fund it.

EA: So the new owner painted over it and then put something else on there, and then painted over that too?

LMS: Yeah, he painted over it [first with whitewash], and it would always start peeking out. People would drive by and put the words on it. He just recently did that heavy paint, so it'll take a while. It'll come back.

But because of its destruction and the way it was done, it really made a big impression on people. It was a lesson about greed, and how little art matters in America. Now there's an international convention that protects art, but the U.S. didn't sign in time to save the mural. It's just a little recapitulation of everything that makes it so hard to live in the United States.

I got this law firm, and they looked into it. Since that time, that lawyer's learned a whole lot about that Bern

Convention. But he couldn't help save the mural. So that happened in '97, the whitewashing, and then that thick, thick stuff, he just did that in the past three months. If it's already peeling after three months, it won't be long.

EA: It's just really hard to imagine.

LMS: It was sad. But then, when they came after it, if I hadn't been embroiled in personal troubles, and trying to finish *Gardens in the Dunes*, and having Simon & Schuster after me, I might have been able to make a better stand. But some part of me wants to paint it again. Of course, it probably will never be exactly like that, because I would get bored, but as

long as I know I can do it again, I don't really mourn that much. I just need a wall. My fantasy is that something will happen to that Mr. Dickhead that destroyed it, eventually that wall will ...

EA: ... will become available again.

LMS: It will become available again. You bet. Either that or it'll fall down.

So all that time, no one harmed it. Not the taggers, not the homeless, not the crackheads, not this or that. It's this wretched dickhead of a rich man. And he does it against all the wishes of the people. And he said he did it because he hated what it stood for. He didn't do it for any other reason, but for the worst kind of reasons. So it was a little education for all these Tucson liberals who think it's such a nice community.

But the importance of this mural is that when I got it done, I walked inside and finished *Almanac of the Dead*. The whole Mexico section came in, and it all came together. I honestly didn't know why I kept having so many snakes in the early part of *Almanac of the Dead*. And then after I painted the mural, I started reflecting on them, and I went inside and wrote the end. The mural was terribly important ultimately to the novel.

The other happy thing, too, in its destruction it became more known. Just this summer, here in Tucson, there was a summer program for kids. They hired local artists to work with the children and the junior high and high school kids to make art projects to keep the kids out of trouble. One of the groups made this great big giant snake! It's three dimensional, a sculpture in concrete, and then they covered it and painted it. You know it's an offspring of that snake. So the big snake is still around. It's out and about in town. That big snake's never going to leave town.

EA: What about the stone snake in Laguna?

LMS: Well, it's really interesting. The tribe moved a state highway to keep people from going too close to it. It came back into this world so close to that highway. So the way I describe it when I first approached it and saw it, now that description doesn't function anymore. The road is moved.

EA: Nice.

LMS: Nice. But radical, too, to move the whole road, because you know it costs millions of dollars to move a highway.

EA: So is that a place people in the community still go?

LMS: Oh, I imagine so. Absolutely.

EA: You referred in an earlier conversation we had to the woman who wrote the invented story about your being banished by the Tribal Council. There's also speculation that it happened because of the stone snake, that

the story about Sterling in *Almanac of the Dead* is about you and the filming of your movie. Do you want to lay those stories to rest?

LMS: It's fiction, okay? And yes, authors do combine imagination with things that they find out in their lives, and things that happen to them. Novelists are always having to explain this, the difference between what happens to them in their lives and where they create a character that has characteristics like theirs. The Laguna people, as I've said before, are way more tolerant and broad-minded than outsiders want them to be.

I just decided I would have that be the reason for Sterling being banished. The real reason I left Laguna and moved down here was that I was going through a divorce and I had to leave. And I came down here. I was called down here, actually, because of the *Almanac* and the spirits. Besides being Laguna, I have Mexican Indian in me too. I have Cherokee, I have lots of tribes. I have lots of callings, and lots of spirits. But the proximate reason for moving to Tucson and moving away from Laguna was the divorce. It was nothing about the tribe, nothing about the people.

EA: So you have NOT been banished by the Tribal Council? Will you say that definitively?

LMS: [Laughter] No, I have not been banished by the Tribal Council! The Tribal Council has more important things to do. Laguna is not like that. At first I thought it was a misunderstanding, because there were a couple of people that had done some things. At first I thought maybe that woman who wrote that about me being banished was confused. But she willfully wanted to rewrite my life and rewrite my relationship with the Laguna Tribal Council and the community. She wanted to make me resemble Dante, and because Dante got in trouble for what he did with municipal authorities, she had to have my life parallel Dante's life.

EA: I guess a lot of that speculation started with that essay by Paula Gunn Allen saying you should not have revealed the clan stories.[6] It seems like it has persisted since then, the desire to understand that you did something outrageous, for which you could not be forgiven.

LMS: [Laughter] Could not be forgiven! The stories that I have and work with are the stories that were told to me by Aunt Alice, who was my grand-aunt, my Grandpa, people within my family and clan, and people that I knew. That was given to me. My sense of that, the hearing and the giving, especially with *Almanac*, was that there was a real purpose for that. I had to take seriously what I was told. There was some kind of responsibility to make sure it wasn't just put away or put aside. It was supposed to be active in my life. We'll never get past the openness and expansiveness that once was, and how the Conquistadors, the invaders,

came, and the dampening of that openness and wanting to share and give. So you start to get into secrecy, closing things off. That's not the original Pueblo way. That's reactionary, protective, and that's a kind of a shrinking away or a diminishment of the spirit of what the people had been able to do. And I just won't bow to it.

But I feel confident that I've never divulged anything that was kept secret. So much of that ownership stuff and talking like that is so—again, who talks about ownership all the time? That's such a Western European kind of thing. And even the anthropologists that Paula is relying on, so much of that material that they work off of was gathered by ethnologists. Even the terminology in English, the way of talking about it, is a secondhand kind of thing. You just can't worry about it. You'd end up just being silent. They want to silence you. Even the kats'ina dances at Laguna that are closed and guarded. The way the Hopi people did it for so long was the way all the Pueblo people must have done it. It was open to the world. It was for world renewal, and all this closing down, that's a reaction to the incoming. That's not the Pueblo way. But of course, people have been hiding and closing down things and closing up for so long, now they're forgetting the older, more open and expansive way.

EA: I really understand the need to do that though, in terms of the lack of respect.

LMS: Oh, yes! I understand that, at the rituals. But as far as for writing, or expressing yourself, it's like when people used to go back to Oxford, Mississippi, and ask about Faulkner. Wherever a novelist or an artist or a writer works, the local people always have some kind of gripes about, oh they shouldn't have written about this, or they shouldn't have talked about that.

EA: Let's go back and talk some more about *Gardens*. You said earlier that Hattie was influenced by Margaret Fuller.

LMS: Yes!

EA: How did you work her into all these other things?

LMS: I've loved Margaret Fuller for years and years. She's a great hero of mine, ever since I was an undergraduate. In my junior year at the University of New Mexico, Hamlin Hill, the great Mark Twain expert, was giving a class on American Transcendentalism. We studied all the Transcendentalists. And of course, I just loved Margaret Fuller. What a woman! What a hero! Free love, so brave, goes to Italy, has a baby out of wedlock, hangs out with all of the Freedom Fighters in Italy. And then, just such a mythical death, within sight of home, with her baby and her husband. The boat sinks off of Fire Island, and she's gone ... ooooh.

I knew of her, and I've always thought of her. Then when I was on book tour, I went to Black Oak Books in Oakland. Often when you're promoting a book, sometimes if you bring in a lot of people, or just as a courtesy to the author, they give you a gift. And so I walked around in that bookstore, and by golly, there was a used copy of a biography of Margaret Fuller's early years. So I have her Italian years and then I have a biography leading up to that, so I started reading them. And then Alice James, that biography. So Hattie's part Alice James too. Alice James was really thwarted, and sort of an invalid. In a sense, Alice James is what Hattie avoids, through her affection and involvement with Indigo, and the firming of her resistance to the way she was railroaded by the culture and the people. Hattie is more like Margaret Fuller than she is Alice James, but Alice James is a good example of the kind of destruction that was set up to happen to a character like Hattie. And it was an example of the fight that Margaret Fuller would have had to carry on if her boat hadn't sunk. So that's how Hattie relates to those two characters.

EA: What about Transcendentalism itself?

LMS: It had a big influence. That course was very important to me. We studied some of the minor Transcendentalists, and one of them was from a rich St. Louis family. He went out into Oklahoma Territory, and he lived for years and years with the Indians. So he was a Transcendentalist who saw something transcendental about Native American views of the world and relationships. Even to this day, I point to American Transcendentalism as a sign of what the old prophecies say about the strangers who come to this continent. The longer they live here, the more they are being changed. Every minute the Europeans, and any other immigrants from any other place, come on to the Americas and start walking on this land. You get this dirt on you, and you drink this water, it starts to change you. Then your kids will be different, and then the spirits start to work on you.

I point to American Transcendentalism and say, if you don't think the change isn't already underway, well, you're a fool. Because the American Transcendentalists are a sign. It's true a lot of their influence comes from the East, but still, it's called American Transcendentalism. And the links with Whitman, and with Thoreau, with earth and land and animals—it's my evidence to the world of the change that's already happening. The Europeans come to this land, and the old prophecies say, not that the Europeans will disappear, but the purely European way of looking at this place and relationships. So the American Transcendentalists, they're the first important sign that this is already underway. The influence of American Transcendentalism is still very strong, whether people

recognize it or not.

EA: Where do you see that change continuing now?

LMS: It's a change in consciousness, and it's ongoing. It has to do with the changes in the way people see, with the whole environmental movement—and a lot of the environmental movement and environmentalism has been co-opted and turned into a capitalist tool. But I would point to, not just the Greens and environmentalism, but the subtle turning of the people toward simplifying. It's just in small ways. We look back in retrospect and say, oh, here's American Transcendentalism. Right now we're in the middle of what it is. But if I have to point at one thing I would say, look at the awareness of more of a oneness—not that it helps in the face of the greedy capitalists—but there is an awareness of plants, animals and earth being much more of a holistic unit.

EA: *Almanac* and *Gardens in the Dunes* both are about capitalism and the effects of capitalism.

LMS: If you would tell me to sit down and write about capitalism, I would just go a-i-i-i-i! [Laughter] I think that sounds so boring. So it's accidental. Of course *Almanac* is a post-Marxist novel, and so is *Gardens in the Dunes*. But if it turns out that they're about capitalism, it's totally unconscious or subconscious. That isn't how I start out writing. But it turns out that way, and I think the reason is because capitalism is so much in the forefront of the destruction of community and people and the fabric of being, and always was—I mean, slavery in the Americas, the destruction of the tribal people, of the world and the animals. And who did capitalism start destroying first? White people in Europe. The poor factory workers that got ground up in the spinning machines that Marx wrote about. Both of the books end up being about that, but that isn't how they started out. If they're like that, if they're about capitalism, it's only because everything around us right now is so permeated with capitalism that I can't help it. You know, just like I said that I wanted to write a novel about gardens, and I thought it wouldn't be political. [Laughter] No, you just can't write an apolitical novel about gardens! Or I couldn't.

EA: The gardens that you're writing about, at least some of them, are very dependent on a capitalist economy to make them possible. So I have really mixed feelings when I'm reading about the gardens. I'm not sure how I'm supposed to feel about those gardens, especially when 60-foot trees are being transplanted to make the gardens perfect.

LMS: That's why Indigo had to be the one to see the Robber Baron gardens on Long Island. Because she could love them, and see them differently from the reader. There's nothing evil about the poor trees, or

about the gardens themselves. It's the conspicuous consumption. You're supposed to be grossed out.

EA: So you're asking us to do something that is very difficult for some of us to do, which is to love the gardens and at the same question how they came to be.

LMS: Yes. That's why you have to try to stay with Indigo. Indigo just sees it and it's all wonder. Indigo wanders through and she sees the blossoms, and she doesn't make any kind of judgment. But of course Hattie's put off by it, Edward doesn't like it, because it takes so much money to keep them going.

I'm interested, you have to be interested, in the plants. They come from all over the world, and they're also another way of looking at colonialism, because everywhere the colonials went, the plants came back from there. But it's spectacle, so I would imagine the reader's feelings would range somewhere in between the feelings of Hattie and Edward, and Indigo. If the reader's completely put off and hates all these gardens, that's fine, because you could.

To me, *Gardens in the Dunes* is mostly funny. And the reader is supposed to be more amused [chuckles] than angry and outraged. I mean, they built these gardens and these ladies really did have Welsh gardeners, if you read about what really went on. It's conspicuous consumption to the max. While Susan Palmer James is making her landscape gardens, they are already going out of style. That is supposed to be ridiculous. You're supposed to kind of feel contempt and amusement. You can like those gardens or not, depending on how much you know or care about the history of them.

But I try to have Indigo see the gardens without all the baggage that comes along with them. I want her to think, oh, Grandma Fleet would love it! I gotta take these seeds back! Because that would be a kind of pure, innocent reaction. And that's one of the reoccurring things in it—gardens, innocence, safety. But also gardens can mean betrayal, plotting. The wicked old Popes used to go into the garden to plot the deaths of Bishops and Cardinals they didn't like. Jesus got betrayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. That's intentional, to have that range of possible ways of looking at the gardens. Yeah, I would expect that the reader would probably be put off by those …

EA: By the excess.

LMS: Yeah, by the excess of the Long Island gardens! The ice to ice down [the greenhouse]! But hey, they're still doing that! Up in Phoenix people are getting truckloads of ice now to put in their swimming pools,

spending hundreds of dollars. Or like the year in Palm Springs some people spent thousands of dollars to truck in snow for their Christmas party! When I got done writing, I thought, a hundred years later, this is the same place. William Gates builds that huge house out on that little island, it's the same thing. These robber baron computer guys are building huge conspicuous consumption homes and gardens. In a hundred years, nothing has changed. That's the weird thing. So this novel is really about right now. It just so happens that, for other reasons, [chuckle] I chose to set it back in 1900.

EA: It's a feeling that I get a lot of the time just in ordinary life, that there are many things that are very beautiful to look at and experience, and yet you can't get away from that sense of what made them, where they came from, what was required to produce and maintain them.

LMS: Exactly. Exactly.

EA: *Almanac* has a lot to say about the effects of capitalism on the lives of people, the way people get consumed. Is there something in *Gardens* that you see as kind of an antidote to that? Are there are hints in this book about how to get away from that? How do we move out of that?

LMS: *Almanac* told you how to move out of that. That's where *Gardens in the Dunes* I think is different. *Gardens in the Dunes* is related to *Almanac*, but I don't think *Gardens in the Dunes* lays out how it will all be dismantled. So in that sense, *Gardens in the Dunes* is under the umbrella of the *Almanac*. *Almanac* talks about how capitalism destroys a people, a continent. This [*Gardens*] is very personal. This is about what capitalism makes people do to one another—what those guys with Edward did to him, what Edward does with Hattie. There's all the anxiety for Edward and Hattie over the debts he owes.

As far as saying how do we get free, or what do we do, *Almanac* is the one that says, this will come and this will happen. *Almanac* just says, now this is going to happen and this is going to happen, and you motherfuckers, you better watch out, and then this is coming! And I stand by it, because you can still see it coming.

Gardens in the Dunes really is about now. It all connects together and it gives you a psychic and spiritual way to try to live within this. I think that's what I'm trying to say about spirituality and the different Jesuses and the Messiahs. It gives you a way, but it gives you a quieter, more personal, more interpersonal way, whereas the *Almanac* lays it out in a more community, worldwide kind of way. This [*Gardens*] still has the world in its structure, there's something within this that will help you see a way, but it's much less political in the overt sense that *Almanac* has it.

I guess it's offering people another way to see things and possible ways to connect up, in a spiritual way, to withstand. In the end I think there's a kind of spiritual and interpersonal accommodation. By trying to go into this personal, spiritual solution, it can't have the kind of bigness of solution that you see in *Almanac of the Dead*.

EA: I think one of the reasons that so many people are attracted to writing by Native Americans is because they're looking for a different way to live, searching for some way to exist in all of this that doesn't feel so contributory. It seems like you have really addressed that.

LMS: Yes, that's what I've tried to do.

EA: Did you consciously set out to do that?

LMS: I just do it instinctively, or intuitively. And then after I've done it for a while I can begin to see, and sometimes I go, oh, all right! And as I said earlier, that impulse to look at things and shift it around, that's how we survive as a species, the instinct for people to seek different ways. That the seekers seek, and that I try to help in what they are seeking, that's something that's in our DNA as human beings. They have a sense that I'm there, and I have a sense that they're there, and that it must be done. That we have to take what we are given, that's so oppressive and destructive, and ask what can we do? It's all in how you look at it. And I feel very proud of it [*Gardens*]. It is going to cause a lot of trouble, because people aren't used to looking at things this way. They're just not. I mean I wasn't, I'm different now after writing *Gardens*.

So that time in Germany was terribly important, and that's where the *Almanac* is still involved. I have a real sense of those people, it's something that comes to me. It's almost like even with this book, I was writing for the seekers without knowing it. Sometimes I wonder why I write what I write, why I do what I do. And then it's later on, after it's written and out in the world, I meet people like yourself, Greg,[7] other people, like the women in Germany, and then I say, okay, now it's complete. Because it's a dialogue.

EA: For me, *Almanac* told me that I needed to be more angry about a lot of things, to speak out, to not let so many things go by. And it seems like this [*Gardens*] is more about how you sustain yourself while you do that, how you keep your insides alive, while you do what you can to fight.

LMS: Right. That's exactly it. That's why I have my women characters. They're basically like my Sand Lizard sisters, the most powerless, at the mercy of everything. These characters are all terribly vulnerable. That's why the characters are powerless, helpless, the last of their people, peaceable people. Look at how vulnerable Edward was. He was way out

of his league, and his whole family—you get the feeling that it's falling apart, they're decaying aristocrats, the money had run out. So in this capitalist world, there's a pecking order among the people with money.
EA: And you get a sense of Edward as somebody who started out a fairly decent person, but just sort of got taken in, swept away by all that.
LMS: He deteriorates, over time.
EA: Trying to do what's expected of him.
LMS: Yes. And he's more and more vulnerable too in his own way. I purposely made no terrible, terrible villains. Even the Australian doctor is really funny. I think the whole *Gardens in the Dunes* is pretty funny. I think *Almanac of the Dead* is pretty funny too.
EA: I do too. The second time I read it!
LMS: Yeah, the second time. [Laughter] That's right. When I was writing it, I didn't think it was so funny, but after I went back over it, I thought, this is pretty funny. So yeah, this is about being a little powerless person. It's not about great movements of armies and people, like *Almanac of the Dead*. This is about, what do you do if you're not only a woman, but also most all of your people are killed off, what do you do? You're right, it's about how you hold yourself together, and how, in that situation, seemingly powerless people can get things done. How people can mean things to one another, how humans, on the most simple interhuman level, can help to sustain each other. How the embattled animals and plants and the embattled people can help one another and keep one another going. So I'm really careful. There are no guns. Well, actually there are some guns [laughter], but they're being delivered South to the revolution, and there are no shoot-em-ups. There's some violence, but it's off-screen.
EA: So you feel like capitalism is unredeemable. No matter how you start out, it's going to do you in?
LMS: Capitalism, yeah.
EA: What are the alternatives?
LMS: The logical thing is that there's finite water, there's finite land, there's finite food. Wherever the water and the land and the food are taken away, hungry people just come after them. So the capitalists and the monsters, they have to kill and kill and kill more, and they don't sleep better at night. There's no way around the fact that you have to share, that in the long run to have peace, for the well-being of everybody, for the health of the planet, for the health of the species, you have to share and take care of one another. And if you don't, then you get what's coming, what the *Almanac of the Dead* says is coming if you don't. Capitalism is absolutely irredeemable.

Now I'm not talking about the free market or private property. I'm talking about *laissez faire*, trample-people-into-the-dirt, destroy-the-earth capitalism. The indigenous people of the Americas had markets. A lot of people want to apply [the term] capitalism to: you make something and you come to the market, and I make something and I come to the market, and we trade. That's not capitalism. You made it, I grew it, we traded with one another, there's no money, there's no bankers, and there's no in-between guys. There's no false baloney. That's not capitalism, that's trade, that's human economy, that's personal enterprise. Capitalism is the middle men, the banks, the government, that kind of economic system that favors the giant and crushes the little person. And we've had giant Communism. Big Communism is no good. Big Socialism is no good. And by big, I mean that some kind of huge apparatus bosses and tells what the little people do.

Regionalism is the hope. Regionalism—what human beings did with plants and animals and rivers and one another before you had the nation-states tramping in—that's where the hope is. Getting rid of all national boundaries. Getting rid of all borders. With regionalism, you do that. You have a region that's organized around Sonoran desert or Chihuahuan desert.

EA: Bioregionalism.

LMS: Yes, bioregions. We get rid of all kinds of national boundaries. Of course, we're going in the opposite direction, with the European union. But that experiment will probably break down.

So yeah, big anything is doomed. Big capitalism is evil. It's flat out evil.

EA: So it's more the size of the system. It seems like that's the same thing that's happened with the religions you were talking about. They get to the point where the system takes over, and everything else is lost.

LMS: Exactly. You exactly have it. That's how I see it about religion. There's even a little episode [in *Gardens*] in a Corsican village. There's an abbey that was built years before to house a portrait of the Blessed Mother that's in gold and silver, and that picture does miracles. So pilgrims would come, and there are monks there; they're there because of that picture. But in the meantime, a few years before Edward and Hattie and Indigo get to this little Corsican village, there's been an apparition on the wall of the school. That actually happened down in Yaqui country, and it might even be in *Almanac of the Dead* in a different form. That would be interesting. But there's an apparition on the wall, so the people start going to the wall, and they stop going up to the abbey. And that

angers the monks. There's a scene where they come down angrily, carrying their crucifixes, to scold the villagers for taking visitors to this schoolhouse wall. So you have this fight against the corporate church that tries to tell people what is holy. And yet there's the persistence of the Virgin to appear on schoolhouse walls and not stay with the silver.

EA: And that's the appeal of the whole Gnostic tradition, that it's unmediated.

LMS: Yeah. And that's why ultimately I hope this is a gnostic novel.

EA: It makes me think about how hungry people are for more direct experience, for something that is more personal, that they have more control over. And that's where the church stays alive, not in the system.

LMS: Exactly. That's another reason why what I'm doing with this novel tries to be more on a personal level. It's a whole different dimension from *Almanac*, on purpose, and I try to keep it like that too, for the reader.

In the Americas, that's where I got inspired. Early on, the Spaniards hadn't been there giving religious instruction for more than five years before all the people got in tune with the Christian spirits, the Christian saints, and took them right in. That's what the Voudun religion is about. That's what happens in the Americas, because it's all inclusive, it excludes nothing. You come here, you'll never be the same again. You'll be taken in and churned around, and what comes out is American. I don't care if it came in European, or it came in Chinese, it comes out American. It's changed by being on this very soil, on this continent.

In Peru and in Mexico, right away the folks started doing that. That's what the Nuestra Señora de Guadelupe is about too. It just freaks out the Europeans, because the Europeans, and a lot of cultures, are so exclusive and want to keep things pure. But here in the Americas, yeah. It was so funny. They weren't here long, and they had to see their Jesus, their Mary, their Joseph, their saints, go native, just like that. And they couldn't stop it.

EA: I think your writing itself really models the kinds of things you are talking about. Part of what draws me to it is the fact that you take so many different ideas, you take what you like and what's useable out of it all, and don't reject things outright. I'm thinking about the kinds of arguments people get into, over capitalism versus socialism for example, as if those are the only two ways and there isn't anything else. And neither of those work, so what are you going to do except stay in the one you've got?

But you take Marx and you use Marx for what he has to say to you. You don't throw him out because he screwed up somewhere along the line, or didn't do it all, which I think is a trap that we fall into. We're

trained to think that way. If they messed up on this point, throw them out and go look for somebody else who does it all, who gets it all right.

LMS: The whole impulse of the Americas is to do just that, to say, well, let's look at it and see if there's anything we can use. But of course, you only include what you want. That's an outgrowth of that old, old way, which I fear so much we're losing. That's what's so special about the Americas and about the tribal people of the Americas—that impulse to say, no, wait, we'll keep what we can. The people who do that [argue for exclusion] become like the destroyers. Then you've become like them, starting to see things just like them. And there are Native Americans out there who see things that way too. And there are Anglo Americans. That's why it's not valid to use race or skin color, and never has been. What matters about human beings, and that's what the old folks knew, what matters is how you feel and how you are and how you see things, and not how you are on the outside. That's what's so tragic about the ugly lessons of racism that have seeped into Native American communities, because the really old folks didn't see things that way at all. That's why in *Almanac* the only hope for the retaking of the Americas is that it's done by people of like hearts and like minds.

EA: You expect *Gardens in the Dunes* to come out early in 1999?

LMS: They're saying April of '99. That's if everything goes all right with Simon & Schuster.

EA: So you're feeling like they aren't going to push for a lot of substantial revision? [In an earlier conversation Silko told me her editor wanted her to shorten or remove the first book of the novel, which describes Sister Salt and Indigo's early life in the canyon of the Sand Lizards.]

LMS: I won't do. I won't. If they won't publish it like it is, I'll buy it back from them. They can't make you do anything, but they can not give you any money to promote it.

EA: What happens to you if they don't invest much in selling it?

LMS: There's nothing I can do, but I'm not too worried. If the worst happens, and they do it the way I want it, and don't give it any kind of budget, it will have to get out into the world through persons like yourself and Greg and other people.

What I'm hoping is that out of their own greed, they won't do that. *Ceremony* made it onto the *Utne Reader*'s list of 150—I don't know what kind of books they are[8]—and *Ceremony* has 500,000 copies in print. But *Ceremony* took off slowly. As time goes by, the books don't change, but the culture changes. When *Ceremony* first came out, it was considered to be really challenging, for the most sophisticated reader. And then

gradually, graduate students could read it, then juniors and seniors in college were considered to be able to read *Ceremony*. Now, precocious juniors in high school suddenly can read *Ceremony*. *Ceremony* didn't change. Something changes within the culture. And the same way with *Almanac*. It'll fit in better and better. If the worst happens, *Gardens* will just come out more slowly. It'll hurt me personally, economically, but the book itself and what it means to the world won't be changed.

EA: Will they send you on a book tour this time?

LMS: I hope so.

EA: Do you enjoy that? Some important things have happened for you on tour.

LMS: Oh yes, I think I do. It's dialogue.

EA: But it's got to be exhausting.

LMS: It's exhausting, you bet it's exhausting. They schedule you way too heavily. That's the part I don't like. But meeting the people who have read the work, that's important. I wouldn't trade meeting the people in Germany for anything. The worst part is that it's systematized. They set it up, and the pace of it is really grueling. And the way the media people treat you, because you're a part of the same complex that sells movies and albums.

EA: The entertainment industry.

LMS: Yeah. That part I dislike, and that part seems to try to feed off that cult of making the maker of the work the point, and not the work itself.

My readers waited ten years for *Almanac of the Dead* to come, and then when I went on book tour, I didn't think anyone would come. Why should they wait for ten years after *Ceremony*? But there they were! They were there. So I like to take a lot of time. Each person comes up to sign the book, and they'll say something like, I've been waiting, and I'll say, you waited! I didn't know whether you would! And we talk.

And then you can see the handlers and the bookstore people. They're looking at the clock, they're looking at the length of the line, and they want it to go like a fucking machine. That's one thing that I really, really will not do. These people waited ten years for this book! These assholes, they don't care about my relationship with the readers. So I have to fight them.

It's incredible, you know. I have a sense that they're there, and that sense sustains me. How can I not? And then there they come! For me it tells me that what I sensed was true. I can't not talk with them. But it certainly flies in the face of the machine.

EA: What's next?

LMS: I've got all kinds of ideas. But I don't know what it might be. The conscious one who sits here and talks to you doesn't know. The one that knows the most is the one that doesn't speak in this form, and that one is working on all kinds of things.

EA: What about Flood Plain Press?[9] Do you intend to keep doing things like that?

LMS: Oh, Flood Plain. I'm still making the books. My son [Robert, a bookseller in Tucson] and his friend mail them out, and I still sell some. Yes, I have that entity there, and I think about making and doing other things, but in the spirit of these handmade books, just like I've done before. I'm still doing my photographs and puttering around with things like that. I don't have anything offhand that I'm doing right now, because I'm at a fallow time.

EA: Do you have a sort of post partum depression after you finish a novel?

LMS: April 27 I put down what I know is the last sentence, and then ... yeah, there's a form of post partum depression. I didn't want to do anything else, even though there was cleaning, all kinds of other things. There was nothing in the world that I loved more, or I wanted to do more, than to make this book, even though towards the end, I knew I had to get it done, and there were all these pressures. The metaphor, or the comparison I would make is, I once had a mother goat, and she had a premature kid and it died. And the goat just was lost, and she kept looking for it, and she would go to the same place where it was. And so I would keep going, I would go just like the old mother goat, to where it was, to the work table, and then get up and wander, and not be able to do anything else. There's a real bereavement and separation. And you'll think of anything, and I did. I did try to think about starting up another book, even though I don't think I'm going to yet. You try to do anything. But there's nothing like the one, nothing can replace it.

Except then I did something I had forbidden myself to do. I was so bereaved, I did something I hadn't allowed myself to do since 1991. I started to think about those characters in *Almanac of the Dead*, the ones who are still alive. And the scariest thing that happened during this post partum time was to hear that siren call. [Laughter] Oh my god ... I let myself listen. I was so bereft, that all of a sudden something in my mind went click, click: remember? You meant to kill off a lot more of them than you did. Wonder where they are? Wonder what they're doing?

EA: That's so wonderful for readers to hear, especially students who've been taught to think there's a right way to read a book, to know that even

for the person who made the book, it's got a life of its own.

LMS: It has a life of its own! Someone said to me after they read *Almanac of the Dead*, that they didn't know I knew so much. And I said, well, I didn't know I knew that much! There's something magical that's going on, and it does have a separate life, and it is an exhibit or an artifact or a part of something greater than just the author's life. It's a part of a culture, and a time, and it reflects that. And it does know more and it does say more than any individual human being. That's why art, whether it's a novel or a play or a symphony or a song, that's why the arts are so mighty and powerful. Some alchemy happens with the individual human being, so that through that human being some kind of connection is made through space-time, through all eternity, that's way bigger than the individual.

That's why I always caution students when they ask me, well what was this about or that about? I try to remind them that this is my take on what I did. And then I tell them it's not mine anymore, it belongs to them. And that it doesn't matter what I say I think that section is about, that I cannot limit that work. The work is separate, and part of the process is that it is to go to the reader, and that the reader makes these connections, and that's how it flows on.

EA: I was thinking about that when you were talking about *Ceremony* and how at first it was just for advanced readers, and then it moved its way down into the high schools. It's not just the times that have changed around it, though. It's changed the times. The book itself has made some of those changes.

LMS: You're right. What happened was, a few teachers of teachers taught it, and then teachers of teachers of teachers taught it. The book appealed to the teachers, the teachers and the book interact. The book helped make that change. It's so beautiful.

EA: You said something the last time I talked to you that I really loved. You talked about the magic of how words are so tiny, yet giant worlds spring up from them. And it ties into some of the things you say about physics too. Something's going on there that we don't know about. Something's happening there on that plane that you were describing before.

LMS: Yes, exactly. I first had the sense of it the day the hardcover of *Ceremony* arrived. It was a few weeks before they shipped it out to the bookstores. I worked two years on it, and I was so nervous about it, and I had no help, no one looked at it. And it was a troubled time in my life, I had such a hard time. It was such a struggle. So then the book came, and

I opened it up, and I burst into tears, because a book is so small. It just seemed so insignificant and small. That was the conscious, the one who talks to you now, those are the kinds of reactions I have. But then, luckily the other level within myself, my little hands, I opened it up and I looked—I don't know what part I opened—and I started to read. And then it was like WOW!

It just turned around, and it was like within this little object are worlds! Inside of here, the mesas and the sun! Animals and the water and the people! Open it up and remember the magic of language. And so that was the first time. Without that sense of what language does, you're just reduced to weighing things and measuring them.

Even with this [*Gardens*], once I got it far along and I would think about the characters, they're alive. All my characters are always alive. I was getting really close to the end of *Gardens in the Dunes*, where Hattie is reunited with the girls, and I knew that this certain thing was going to happen. I thought Hattie's folks would come for her and take her back. I thought that was what was supposed to happen. I was really close to the end, and I'd been rolling along so well. But then I started to feel the novel not want to go. I had to stop and say, well now, what's wrong? What is it that I'm not doing right? It's with Hattie's character. Hattie, what is it? There's something you don't like.

Hattie didn't want to just leave. Hattie wanted to get even, so wait till you see what happens. She wasn't going to go softly or quietly away. So I did it, and it was like whoosh, and it was okay. That was really shocking, when I wasn't doing what that character wanted me to do. Not what I wanted–the one who sits here and talks to you. I thought I had this idea about how it would go, what Hattie would do and how she would go out of the novel. And it really was as if that character was saying no. No, this isn't quite right. This isn't what I did, or I want to do. There's something else. I had a sense of the Hattie character saying, you know there's something else. Okay, I do know, oh, that's what you want to do! Wow! All right, now I see why you were unhappy with me. I was just going to have you just leave like that? Oh, okay.

EA: This novel seems to be very much about the subconscious. You feel it at work in there all the time. The characters are operating on one level, but all these other things are working underneath on them. And in them and through them.

LMS: Good. That's good.

EA: I know you've read all of Freud's work. You've talked about that many times. Were you thinking of that while you were writing?

LMS: No.
EA: This is his time, the turn of the century.
LMS: No, I think I forgot it until you mentioned it. But of course, it must be very important. Again, the one who sits here doesn't know anything about that. [Laughter] You're exactly right. But yes, I hope that it's seen as a tribute to him, because *Almanac of the Dead* is my tribute to Marx. I might have mentioned Freud in *Almanac*. He has some part in there, because when I was blocked during writing *Almanac*, I read Freud. Whoosh, right through.
EA: Volume one through eighteen!
LMS: But yeah, this is exactly what I wanted to happen. That wasn't what I was thinking when I was doing it. When I was doing it I was just struggling. But now that you tell me that this is what's going on, then I can say, oh, good. That would be just what I would like to do, especially for Freud. You have all his dimwit followers and misinterpreters. Feminists and all kinds of people have their complaints about Freud. He was only one man and one lifetime, and he wrote like an angel. What he uncovered about that connection with language, it's right there, and I lived it. It all happened seamlessly or effortlessly. I guess my subconscious is really wanting to acknowledge him and I'm glad I could do it like that.
EA: I'll have to think about that in Indigo, though, because she seems whole in a way that the other characters aren't. Her conscious and her unconscious are not separated in the same way.
LMS: You're right, she's a little bit different.
EA: She's just very much present in her experience all the time.
LMS: Yeah.
EA: And part of that is that she's a child.
LMS: She's a child.
EA: But there's something else too.
LMS: Something else too, yeah. Oh yeah.

Epilogue: A Prophecy

LMS: You're in this situation, no one's ever seen it before. All of the old ways don't work. There's nothing to be done. There's an old Pueblo story about that. That's why Kochininako goes off with Buffalo Man, that's why she has a propensity for adultery. Adultery symbolizes breaking with everything that's known or supposed to be. The people are hungry, and she goes off with the Buffalo people and makes that liaison, and the people survive. One can imagine long, long ago when the Ice Age started

to come, or there were terrible cosmic or volcanic and tidal waves and things like that. When everything that's been thought or known no longer holds, then that's when a person like myself, who doesn't fit in, who is a little bit frightening, a little bit strange to the others, that's where that vision comes in and is necessary.

EA: Like the Year 2000 problem [the potential computer crash]!

LMS: Exactly.

EA: It's very likely that we'll see just how important that vision is.

LMS: There'll be reports in the aftermath, and there'll be all these people saying, the people at Laguna, or the Navajos, gee, they didn't have much trouble during that time. Well yeah, because they had managed to barely cling. Or some of the folks up in the mountains everyone is always making fun of, they'll hardly notice. I learned that truth years ago, when some of my students at Navajo Community College wrote about the Great Depression. Hey! There was plenty of rain that year. They remembered the depression years as good years, years of plenty. Why? Because they didn't have anything to do with that paper charade on Wall Street.

The fear is that the instability in Asia, the overpriced stock market, and then the Year 2000 bug—those things together [will cause a disaster]. And in the aftermath, how ever many years later, you watch. We'll laugh because we already knew it was developing. They'll be writing about, oh, it was so interesting, who was affected and what was affected. And of course they'll find out that the people with the more diverse ways—whether they were forced by political, economic, geographical, whatever exigencies, to do things differently, to not be hooked into the web. Then hopefully out of those summations and conclusions will be, we must never again all be hooked! We must remember! But no, right now, we'll have to all go through it and suffer.

Some of us have been trying to say it all along. But no, it seems like they have to have something like that. In a way, I'm glad it will be something as apolitical, so universally loved as computers. That it won't be the usual things over some kind of religious issue or something like that. It's perfect. It's just beautiful. And oh, the old Mayans will laugh, because they understood how to use the zero, in mathematics. And what was the undoing of the modern world? Was it a war or a bizarre machine? Was it a virus or an asteroid hitting the earth? Oh no. Only two zeros. And what does a zero mean? What does a zero stand for? Nothing. What did them in? Nothing. [Laughter]

They're always talking about the Western European fear of nothingness. Here it is. Oh, it's nothing.

EA: Nothing brought it all down.
LMS: Nothing brought it all down. Nothing. Zero zero!

NOTES

[1]This portion of the interview was selected to focus on *Almanac of the Dead* and *Gardens in the Dunes*. It has been edited for clarity and continuity.

[2]In previous conversations, Silko conveyed her excitement to me about recent experiments in particle physics demonstrating that twinned electron or photon pairs, when split apart in a particle accelerator, still seem to communicate with each other instantaneously over long distances. She called my attention to an article by George Johnson in the July 31, 1997 *New York Times*, "The Unspeakable Things That Particles Do."

[3]Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, "Cosmopolitanism, Nationalism, the Third World, and Tribal Sovereignty," *Wicazo Sa Review* 9 (1993): 26-36.

[4]Southern Humanities Council Conference on Justice, Huntingdon College, Montgomery, Alabama, March 20-22, 1998.

[5]A black and white photograph of the mural is reproduced in *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*, pages 150-151.

[6]Paula Gunn Allen, "Special Problems in Teaching Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*," *American Indian Quarterly* 14.4 (1990): 379-86.

[7]Gregory Salyer, who has written the first book length study of Silko's work, *Leslie Marmon Silko* (New York: Twayne, 1997).

[8]"The Loose Canon: 150 Great Works to Set Your Imagination on Fire," *Utne Reader* 87 (1998): 52-59.

[9]Silko's own press, which published *Sacred Water*, among other things (Flood Plain Press c/o Fine Print, 2828 N. Stone Avenue, Tucson, Arizona 85705).

From Big Green Fly to the Stone Serpent: Following the Dark Vision in Silko's **Almanac of the Dead**

Annette Van Dyke

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In her novel, *Ceremony,* Leslie Marmon Silko shows the reader a world in which the evil comprised by what she calls the witchery can be mitigated and put to rest temporarily by the efforts of the community. Her protagonist, Tayo, confronts the witchery both within himself and the tribe and its effects on the land in the form of a drought. The spiritual health of the community is restored and Silko can offer the whole book up as a healing ceremony for herself and her readers: "Sunrise,/ accept this offering,/ Sunrise" (*Ceremony* 262). However, in *Almanac of the Dead,* Silko takes the story of the witchery that appears in the center of *Ceremony* (132-38), elaborates, and extends it until it becomes the whole. In a masterful plot, she connects the ancient Mayas, through the fragments of almanacs that reside with some of her Yaqui characters, to the present and the future, which the almanacs foretell. Her own people, the Laguna Pueblo, are represented by Sterling who is exiled into the world of the witchery beyond the reservation for revealing the location of a stone serpent to a Hollywood film crew. The novel ranges geographically from Tucson, Arizona, through Mexico and into Central America, with an episode set in Alaska.

In an interview, Silko said half-jokingly about *Almanac* that she was writing a novel that "will horrify the people at MLA" and that "when you shop at a Safeway store, it will be in the little wire racks at the checkout station" (Barnes 83-84). She is saddened by the fact that "so little serious fiction gets out in the world" (Barnes 84). She also sees *Almanac* as a sort of trial by novel. In his capacity as tribal treasurer, her father used stories to testify for the Laguna land boundaries, and Silko uses *Almanac* to

document 500 years of the effects of the witchery working through colonialism. As Silko points out in *Almanac,* there is no justice in the courts for the common people: "Laws in England and the United States traced their origins to the 'courts' of feudal lords who had listened to complaints and testimony and then passed judgment on the serfs" (535).[1] The novel appeared in time for the quincentennial commemoration of Columbus' arrival in the Americas.

In an appearance at Ohio University's Spring Literary Festival in Athens, Ohio in 1992, when questioned about the depressing nature of the novel, Silko said that maybe it wasn't supposed to be read. Although that contradicts what she said about wanting to write a serious novel that would have a wide appeal while she was writing *Almanac,* it may be that she understands the difficulty of readers dealing with her vast tale of drug dealers, military tyrants, self-serving land developers, and even corrupted Native Americans. Further, if, as she says, the almanac of the title "refers to the Mayan almanacs or Mayan codices" (Barnes 103) and she has created yet another, one doesn't read an almanac in the same way one reads a novel. In his introduction to his translation of the *Popol Vuh,* one of the four remaining Mayan books, Dennis Tedlock discusses how the book would have operated for its readers:

> If the ancient *Popol Vuh* was like the surviving hieroglyphic books, it contained systematic accounts of cycles in astronomical and earthly events that served as a complex navigation system for those who wished to see and move beyond the present. … But the authors of the alphabetic *Popol Vuh* tell us that there were also occasions on which the reader offered "a long performance and account" whose subject was the emergence of the whole *cabu/eu* or "sky-earth," which is the Quiche' [Mayan] way of saying "world." If a divinatory reading or pondering was a way of recovering the depth of vision enjoyed by the first four humans, a "long performance," in which the reader may well have covered every major subject in the entire book, was a way of recovering the full cosmic sweep of that vision. (32)

We might say that Silko is doing a "long performance," but one in which the only pieces of the almanac or story that remain are those which document the time "'the blood worshipers' of Europe met the 'blood worshipers' of the Americas" *(Almanac 570)* and the resulting destruction which continues into the present.

Silko also means her novel to be used as prophetic. Of the Mayan books she says:

> The almanacs were literally like a farmer's almanac. They told you the identity of the days, but not only what days were good to plant on, but some days that were extremely dangerous. There were some years that were extremely unfortunate with famine and war. There were other years, even epochs, that would come that would be extremely glorious and fertile. … They believed that a day was a kind of being and it had a … we would maybe say a personality, but that it would return. It might not return again for five thousand or eight thousand years, but they believed that a day exactly as it had appeared before would appear again. (Barnes 105)

The central focus in *Almanac* is on the prophecy about the appearance and eventual disappearance of Europeans: "Europeans called it coincidence, but the almanacs had prophesied the appearance of Cortes to the day. All Native American tribes had similar prophecies about the appearance, conflict with, and eventual disappearance of things European" (570). The days which Silko's fragments record and which the reader expects to return seem to be mostly the dangerous ones dating from 1560—the days of plague, sickness and death, culminating in the exhortation to "rise up against the slave masters" when the "story ... arrive[s] in your town" (578).

Storytelling is central to the novel—story in the form of the almanac and in the form of prophecy—but also in the form of each character's personal story. Yoeme, an ancient Yaqui woman whose story links the days of the Spanish conquerors with the days of her granddaughters, Zeta and Lecha, "believed the almanac had living power within it, a power that would bring all the tribal people of the Americans together to retake the land" (570). She "believed power resides within certain stories; this power ensures the story to be retold, and with each retelling a slight but permanent shift took place" (581).

Silko seems to be pointing out to her readers that, in the long view, American civilization's time is running out. She says:

> [O]nly Americans think that we'll just continue on. It takes a tremendous amount of stupid blind self-love to think that your civilization or your culture will continue on, when all you have to do is look at history and see that civilizations and people a lot better than people building the MX have disappeared. (Barnes 89)

The pessimism of this, set against Silko's optimistic novel *Ceremony*, is what makes *Almanac* especially difficult to read. Readers of *Ceremony* waited fourteen years, broken only by the publication of the important *Storyteller*, for *Almanac*. In 1981, Silko won the prestigious John and Catherine MacArthur Prize Fellowship for work in fiction, poetry and film which, as she says in the acknowledgments, "launched" *Almanac*.[2] Therefore, expectations for *Almanac* were high among her readers, and Silko has acted as a sort of trickster in this regard, showing us things we perhaps do not want to see. However, if we believe in the power of the stories, we must believe in the bad as well as the good, particularly in the tale of the witchery that cannot be called back. We are left to devise our own ceremonies, if we can, a most disturbing development.

Silko says that when she was writing *Ceremony*, as her character Tayo "got better," she "felt better" (Fisher 20), so *Ceremony* functions as a kind of curing ceremony for Silko herself. As Tayo seems to act as somewhat of a surrogate for Silko in *Ceremony* in contributing to her health, Sterling might be seen to perform that function in *Almanac*. Since some controversy arose among the Laguna about her use of clan stories in *Ceremony*, she puts her character Sterling in a situation in which he has also caused controversy among the people and tries to work that out.[3]

In *Ceremony*, even though the violence and destruction is part of a complicated pattern emanating from World War II and the taking of Pueblo land to mine uranium and make the bomb, the curing ceremony is primarily within and for Tayo's people themselves. However, *Almanac* concerns itself with violence and harm–the witchery–on a much broader scope, testing even Silko's imaginative powers for devising healing ceremonies. How does one "cure" or bring back to balance whole continents? As Silko gives it, the "hope for indigenous tribal people ... to prevail against the violence and greed of the destroyers" is to act in league with "the inestimable power of the earth and all the forces of the universe" (723). In the people's spiritual army,

> [a]ll were welcome. It was only necessary to walk with the people and let go of all the greed and the selfishness in one's heart. One must be able to let go of a great many comforts and all things European, but the reward would be peace and harmony with all living things. All they had to do was return to Mother Earth. No more blasting, digging, or burning. (710)

In *Almanac* as in *Ceremony*, there are two kinds of characters. As

Paula Gunn Allen states about *Ceremony*:

> [T]hose in the first category belong to the earth spirit and live in harmony with her, even though that atonement may lead to tragedy. Those in the second are not of earth but of human mechanism; they live to destroy that spirit, to enclose and enwrap it in their mechanations, condemning all to a living death. (*Sacred Hoop* 118)

In *Almanac*, most of those of European descent fall into the second category, for "[t]hey failed to recognize the earth was their mother. Europeans were like their first parents, Adam and Eve, wandering aimlessly because the insane God who had sired them had abandoned them" (258). However, those of African descent more often fall into the first category since "the spirits were all around, and the tribal people torn from Mother Africa had not been deserted by the spirits" (746). They could reclaim their connection to the earth spirit.

In *Ceremony*, the representation of the earth spirit or Thought Woman is manifested in Ts'eh. As Allen notes:

> Ts'eh is the matrix, the creative and life-restoring power, and those who cooperate with her designs serve her and, through her, serve life. They make manifest that which she thinks. The others serve the witchery; they are essentially inimical to all that lives, creates, and nurtures. (*Sacred Hoop* 118)

In *Almanac*, there is no nurturing, life restoring spirit. There are only the enraged spirits:

> The spirits are outraged! They demand justice! The spirits are furious! To all those humans too weak or too lazy to fight to protect Mother Earth, the spirits say, "Too bad you did not die fighting the destroyers of the earth because now we will kill you for being so weak, for wringing your hands and whimpering while the invaders committed outrages against the forests and the mountains." ... Sixty million dead souls howl for justice in the Americas! (723)

In *Ceremony*, the old stories record spirit messengers such as Big Green Fly, who goes to the underworld, the place of the earth spirit, to appease her–to make offerings for the community. In *Ceremony*, there is the sense that all things animate and inanimate can work together to bring back the balance. However, in *Almanac* the spirit messengers such as the stone

snake come from the gods with dire warnings of more suffering and bloodshed to come.

The role of the storyteller when dealing with overwhelming violence is prefigured in "Storyteller," the title story of the book of the same name. In "Storyteller," the Yupik protagonist is compelled to tell her story as she knows it, even when it means that she will not go free. It is a matter of power, pride, and cultural survival not to succumb to the Europeans' way of seeing things, which says that the death of the storekeeper was an accident. She knows that she plotted to lead him out onto the ice without his parka and that she is responsible for his death. Like the grandfather whose role she had inherited, she will tell her story that "must be told, year after year as the old man has done, without a lapse of silence" (31-32). It is a protest, a testimony, a witness to the violence that has been done to her and her community and speaks to endurance and survival. As Kenneth Roemer says, "The acts of violence in 'Storyteller' form complex webs of associations between past, present, and future" (7). This is the same pattern that Silko uses for both *Ceremony* and *Almanac.*

In *Almanac,* Silko also includes an Alaskan connection. Her psychic character Lecha remembers a year in Alaska when she boarded with a Native American woman, Rose, whose six sisters and brothers had burned in a fire while she was away at the boarding school for Eskimos and Indians. Her parents had been "across the river at the bootlegger's house" (150). Lecha also met an old woman who

> had gathered great surges of energy out of the atmosphere, by summoning spirit beings through recitations of the stories that were also indictments of the greedy destroyers of the land. With the stories the old woman was able to assemble powerful forces flowing from the spirits of ancestors. (156)

In *Almanac,* Silko weaves in a story of European betrayal and violence with survival and revenge of the Alaskan natives. When the final gathering comes, Rose and the angry Alaskan spirits will be part of that group.

Roemer points out that if we build on traditional Native American narratives, such violence as shown in "Storyteller" and *Almanac* can be seen as transformative—"transcending experiences of survival" (1). He says:

> I hope to suggest that narrative paradigms from Native American myths that don't conform to familiar Western linear or binary concepts can jar readers into

> questioning conventional causal or oppositional concepts implied in episodes of violence discovered in contemporary Native American fiction. This questioning can help readers to evaluate the possibilities implied by the texts, specifically to consider what types of agents (including violence) can or cannot transform the lives and worldviews of contemporary Indians. (6)

In the violent story of *Almanac,* Silko, herself, plays the role of the Yupik storyteller, reciting the story we do not want to hear—witnessing for the indigenous community. She is giving the long performance and the "cosmic sweep of the vision" of what the Destroyers have wrought (Tedlock 32).

In an interview with Elaine Jahner, Silko discussed *Ceremony,* pointing out that her novel is about relationships:

> Relationships are not just limited to man-woman, parent-child, insider-outsider; they spread beyond that. What finally happens in the novel, for example, is that I get way out of the Southwest in a sense and get into the kind of destructive powers and sadism that the Second World War brought out. Yet it is all related back to Laguna in terms of witchcraft. (387)

In *Almanac,* Silko describes the relationship between violent Europeans and violent Native Americans and the resulting "destructive powers and sadism" that extend even to today. As Jahner explains:

> In describing her novel, Silko herself relates to an ancient pattern of going out from a central point and then coming back with new insights that keep the home place vital. "It is all related back" and somewhere in it all we find points of convergence as we participate in the ceremony of the art. (387)

Silko builds an elaborate tale beginning with Sterling from Laguna who, having been sent to the white boarding schools, "never paid much attention to the old-time ways because he had always thought the old beliefs were dying out" (762). After he is exiled for disrespecting those very beliefs when the stone snake appears, he leaves Laguna and goes to Tucson where he is hired as a gardener to work on the ranch of the elderly Yaqui twin sisters, Lecha and Zeta.[4] Lecha is a television psychic who finds the dead, but who has returned to the ranch to work on transcribing the fragments of the Mayan almanac, bringing with her an assistant, Seese. Seese had sought out Lecha to find her stolen baby.

In Silko's story these people are connected by more than accident. All are related to the days when Cortes met Montezuma. As Silko puts it, as a child Sterling had been warned,

> always to be careful around Mexicans and Mexican Indians because when the first Europeans had reached Mexico City they had found the sorcerers in power. Montezuma has been the biggest sorcerer of all.[5] Each of Montezuma's advisors had been sorcerers too, descendants of the very sorcerers who had caused the old-time people to flee to Pueblo country in Arizona and New Mexico, thousands of years before. Somehow the offerings and food for the spirits had become too bloody, and yet many people had wanted to continue the sacrifices. They had been excited by the sacrifice victim's feeble struggle; they had lapped up the first rich spurts of hot blood. The Gunadeeyah clan [Destroyers] had been born. (760)

Those of the Gunadeeyah clan "had called for their white brethren to join them," and "the Spaniards had arrived in Mexico fresh from the Church Inquisition with appetites whetted for disembowelment and blood" (760). This is an example of Silko's belief that to say evil resides only in white people is a "simplistic view, because from the very beginning, the betrayals of our people occurred through deeply complicated convergences of intentions and world views" (Seyersted 33).

It is significant that Silko picks the Pueblos, Mayans, and the Yaqui to feature in her cast of characters–all of these had won significant battles against the Europeans.[6] As Edward Spicer notes, the Yaquis "supported military action against Mexican troops at the edges of or within their traditional tribal territory" for 51 years from 1858-1909 (153), but by 1910, they "had become the most widely scattered native people of North America, extending as a result of forced dispersal, from the henequen plantations of lowland Yucatan among the Maya Indians to the barrios of southern California among the urbanite Anglo-Americans of Los Angeles" (158). Yaqui settlements also could be found in Tucson and New Mexico. The Pueblo revolt of 1680 in New Mexico also drove the Spanish out. At the time Silko was writing, there was an uprising of indigenous peoples in Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua. In her novel, Silko predicts that this rebellion "spreads north into Mexico" and "[t]he United States ... intervenes and sends troops and tanks ... into Mexico" (Barnes 104).

The Yaqui called themselves Yoeme, meaning the people, and the

Yaqui grandmother of the twin girls is named Yoeme; she is a storyteller, a representative of the people who emerges at a time when the bloodlines are being mixed and the people are losing their traditional culture. Leaving her children to be raised by her German husband, a particularly vicious and bloodthirsty mine owner, she reappears when the twin girls are old enough to understand her stories. She charges them with reconstructing the fragments of the almanac after her, and in this way preserves the old culture.

In Southwestern and Mexican lore, twins are portentous figures. For instance, in one Pueblo story, "Ma'see'wi and Ou'yi'ye'wi/ the twin brothers/ were caring for the mother corn altar," get interested in a "Ck'o'yo medicine man," and neglect their duties, bringing on a drought (*Ceremony* 46). In *Almanac*, the Mayan story goes: "In the old days the Twin Brothers had answered the people's cry for help when terrible forces or great monsters threatened the people" (475). Among Silko's characters are twin brothers, Tacho and El Feo, who have been separated at birth so as not to bring "dangers from envious sorcerers; later there might be accusations of sorcery made against the twins together" (469). Tacho becomes a spirit macaw tender and, like Lecha, tries to read the prophecies. His brother becomes the leader of the indigenous army destined to sweep the Americas.

Also central to the story is that of the twin god Quetzalcoatl (Morning Star, twin to Evening Star) whose return was expected the year Cortes came to the Yucatan. This return would set in motion 468 years of suffering and bloodshed as "the balance from death to life, from war to peace, from conquest and destruction to reconciliation and healing" was wrought (Allen, *Grandmothers* 97). Unlike his twin, who demanded human sacrifice, "the benevolent, gentle Quetzalcoatl" (*Almanac* 519), the Great Serpent, "forbade human sacrifice … Insisted that all should sacrifice themselves instead of others, sacrifice their own extreme appetites and their comfort" (Allen, *Grandmothers* 95). Silko's novel is a cry to return to self-sacrifice for the good of others, the giving up of luxuries to honor the earth spirit as the time foretold so long ago draws to a close.

A theme that runs throughout *Almanac* is the question of what it is to be human. The *Popol Vuh* records a number of stories about attempts of the gods to create human beings. According to Dennis Tedlock, what the gods "want is beings who will walk, work, and talk in an articulate and measured way, visiting shrines, giving offerings, and calling upon their makers by name, all according to the rhythms of a calendar" (34). On the

first try, they get "beings who have no arms to work with and can only squawk, chatter, and howl, and whose descendants are the animals of today" (34). It is not until the third try, using wood, that something closer to their idea of human occurs. However, even these "fail to time their actions in an orderly way and forget to call upon the gods in prayer" and so they, too, are destroyed by flood and by "monstrous animals" (35). Their descendants become the monkeys.

Interestingly, Silko's character El Feo, one of the twin brothers, knows of a village of sorcerers who give out "a simple remedy for all illness and evil" written on a piece of paper (479). This is truly witches' work as the story on the paper is that of the third creation: "They looked like humans/ … These wooden figures had no minds or souls./ They did not remember their Creator/ Death Macaw gouges their eyes/ Death Jaguar devours their flesh/ Death Crocodile breaks and mangles their nerves and bones/ and crumbles them to dust" (479-80). It is no accident that Menardo, the wealthy and unscrupulous mestizo, is seen as "a yellow monkey who imitated real white men" (399) by Tacho his driver; he is less than human, a descendant of the soulless wooden people.

Under the sections entitled "Reign of Death-Eye Dog" and "Reign of Fire-Eye Macaw," Silko discusses the life of the Mexican elite— military tyrants and their families. As Sterling comments, "[T]he people he had been used to calling 'Mexicans' were really remnants of different kinds of Indians. But what had remained of what was Indian was in appearance only. ... They had lost contact with their tribes and their ancestors' worlds" (88). In Silko's massive novel, in the recurring "epoch Death-Eye Dog" or Fire-Eye Macaw, "human beings, especially the alien invaders [those who had abandoned the earth spirit], would become obsessed with hungers and impulses commonly seen in wild dogs" (251). In addition, Fire-Eye Macaw

> was the same as saying "Death-Eye Dog" because the sun had begun to burn with a deadly light and the heat of this burning eye looking down on all the wretched humans and plants and animals had caused the earth to speed up too—the way heat makes turtles shiver in a last frenzy of futile effort to reach shade. (257)

The almanac fragments also contain references to lakes drying up, which is significant particularly to the Keres-speaking Pueblo whose emergence from the underworld was said to "be directly beneath a particular lake" (Bierhorst 82). The fragments indicate that jealousy among the people drained the lake and drove away the giant serpent:

> Maah' shra-True'-Ee is the giant serpent
> the sacred messenger spirit
> from the Fourth World Below.
> He came to live at the Beautiful Lake, Ka-waik,
> that was once near Laguna village.
> But neighbors got jealous.
> They came one night and broke open the lake
> so all the water was lost. The giant snake
> went away after that. He has never been seen since.[7] (135)

In *Ceremony*, we are pulled back from the brink of destruction, but not so in *Almanac* in which the Destroyers' forces seem too strong. When Sterling returns to his Pueblo people, he is changed. He appreciates the old beliefs, the natural things around him—the red sandstone cliffs and the high thin clouds. He imagines the return of "plentiful" rain clouds, of "bellyhigh" grass and wildflowers, of buffalo herds (758). However, this is no immediate healing vision; the meaning of the stone snake is apparent in the "cruel years that were to come once the great serpent had returned" (703).

> The snake didn't care if people were believers or not; the work of the spirits and prophecies went on regardless. Spirit beings might appear anywhere, even near open-pit mines. The snake didn't care about the uranium tailings; humans had desecrated only themselves with the mine, not the earth. Burned and radioactive, with all humans dead, the earth would still be sacred. Man was too insignificant to desecrate her. ... Sterling knew why the giant snake had returned now; he knew what the snake's message was to the people. The snake was looking south, in the direction from which the twin brothers and the people would come. (763)

The giant snake's return is to the open mine pit instead of a lake—a testament to the destruction which has occurred. The snake is a warning of the terrible time to come in which humans may not survive. Euro-Americans especially have abandoned the earth spirit, but so, too, have many Native Americans. In spite of this, we might see *Almanac* as a kind of exorcism—Silko's way of "[s]tanding before the world of beauty and. terror … the final way of saying, 'I will live in spite of what is going on before my eyes, in spite of every prophet of doom and destruction'" (Warrior 126). As Robert Warrior says of Native Americans,

> Our struggle at the moment is to continue to survive and work toward a time when we can replace the need

> for being preoccupied with survival with a more responsible and peaceful way of living within communities and with the ever-changing landscape that will ever be our only home. (126)

NOTES

[1]Silko includes a "poet lawyer," Wilson Weasel Tail, in her cast of characters in *Almanac*. He urges in poetry that the land should be returned to indigenous peoples. See 713-16 and 721-25.

[2]According to a biography in *Songs from This Earth on Turtle's Back: Contemporary American Indian Poetry*, Joseph Bruchac, ed., Silko had planned to finish *Almanac* in 1984.

[3]See Patricia Riley's discussion of Silko's use of clan stories in "The Mixed Blood Writer as Interpreter and Mythmaker."

[4]See Silko's discussion of the appearance of the stone snake at the Jackpile uranium mine near Paguate, New Mexico, on the Laguna Pueblo reservation in 1980 in "Fifth World: The Return of Ma ah shra true ee, the Giant Serpent" in *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*.

[5]John Bierhorst discusses the nineteenth century "cult of Montezuma in the eastern pueblos, where sacred fires were kept burning in his honor, awaiting the day when he would come to deliver the people from non-lndian intruders" in *The Mythology of North America* (106). Apparently, Silko does not see Montezuma as some sort of savior. See Gloria Anzaldúa's "Entering into the Serpent" for a discussion of the changes in Mesoamerican culture from clan-based, balanced cultures to the class-based militaristic culture of the Aztecs.

[6]Silko lists a number of these battles in *Almanac*. See pages 525-28.

[7]This story is told again in a later passage of the book: "Marsha-true'ee, the Giant Plumed Serpent, messenger spirit of the underworld, came to live in the beautiful lake that was near Kha-waik. But there was jealousy and envy. They came one night and broke open the lake so all the water was lost. The giant snake went away after that. He has never been seen since. That was a great misfortune for the Kha-waik-meh" (577).

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Freud, Marx and Chiapas in Leslie Marmon Silko's Almanac of the Dead

Deborah Horvitz

On January 1, 1994, with the clarion call of ¡BASTA! (ENOUGH!) the Zapatista National Liberation Army (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional), the EZLN, declared war on the government of Mexico. Indigenous and peasant armies in Chiapas, revolting against the dictating Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) that has dominated Mexico for the past sixty-five years, set fire to municipal offices, kidnapped the former governor of Chiapas, and broke into a prison, freeing almost two hundred inmates. Under the signature of Subcomandante Marcos, the rebel group issued demands for democracy, justice, housing, food, and, most critical, a plan by which land stolen from native peoples must be redistributed. "Land and Liberty"—the mandate of the EZLN—echoes the battle cry of Mexican Revolutionary leader Emiliano Zapata from whom and in whose honor the Chiapan group takes its name.

Leslie Marmon Silko's second novel, *Almanac of the Dead* (1991), predicts a revolution beginning in Chiapas that is astonishing in its similarities to and parallels with the EZLN uprising. An undeniable textual relationship exists between the imagined revolt in Silko's book and the actual, corporeal one being waged from the Lacandón Jungle. The appearance of *Almanac of the Dead* almost simultaneous with the EZLN insurrection contributes to the "true miracle of the Zapatista uprising" that the Mexican left call *coyuntura*: "the 'coming together' of distinct social and cultural moments and currents in the jungle and the Altos of Chiapas" (Marcos 9). Opening his 1995 book, *BASTA! Land and the Zapatista Rebellion in Chiapas,* George Collier asks: "In the summer of 1993,

Tucson writer Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* (1991), a novel prognosing native [*sic*] American rebellion from Chiapas to Arizona, suddenly captured an audience of readers in Chiapas. Was there a special reason for such fascination?" (Collier 1).[1]

Significantly, Silko's words and no one else's appear on the back cover of Subcomandante Marcos' *Shadows of Tender Fury* (1995), where she insists that the EZLN leader's text is "essential reading."

> I did not expect such imagination or clarity from a Subcomandante, nor did I expect the fine sense of humor which enriches his writing. He writes with a fine passion for justice but also with unusual compassion for his adversaries. No boring political rhetoric or pompous academic cant—Subcomandante Marcos uses stories—ancient as well as recent—to reveal the origins of the 1994 Zapatista uprising.

Subcommander Marcos' failing health, combined with his pessimism regarding peace negotiations between the EZLN and the PRI held in the fall of 1995, attenuate the celebratory *coyuntura* of this rebellion, until we remember that its context is five hundred years of determined political resistance on the part of Indians against white European landowners in the Americas and the Caribbean Islands.[2]

Though this essay's primary focus is not the actual EZLN uprising in Chiapas, it is concerned with *Almanac*'s political revolution which aims to destroy the power base of the same European invaders (or their descendants) targeted by the Zapatistas. Additionally, Silko's interest in unconscious and uncanny communication makes relevant my discussion of the Chiapan revolt.[3]

Silko warns Western civilization to avoid the destruction of the earth by heeding the ultimate, simple message from displaced, native people: bear witness to past and current oppression, and return stolen land. She presents us with the formidable task of deciphering and interpreting her almanac's complex, camouflaged, encoded stories in order to avoid the consequences of ignorance. Silko moves simultaneously in several narrative directions to emphasize her mandate that the past, no matter how painful, must be recognized and remembered. Raising the stakes of this ultimatum so that its violation results in Western civilization's demise, she imagines a materialistic, soulless culture that has been seduced, then overtaken by vacuous, greedy Destroyers. Cut off from their ancestors' stories and art, the Destroyers' victims who, in fact, become the Destroyers of the next generation, literally shrivel up and die as did Lecha's and

Zeta's father. Significantly, *Almanac* suggests that the textual process of decoding its narrative parallels that of untangling the disguised content of the unconscious, for the actual manifestation of each code is the same. That is, both appear through dreams, symbols, stories, and repetitive, frequently surreal, imagery. Through her manipulation of the concept of repetition, Silko blends incongruous concepts—for example, Native American literary theory and psychoanalysis—into a synchronous text designed to integrate and fuse paradox through narrative, as a ceremony does through dance.

Illuminating its modernity, *Almanac* operates not only cyclically, but with a whirling centripetal force interweaving spiritual beliefs from different Native American cultures with Western psychoanalytic theory, Marxian ideology, and post-structuralist literary strategy.[4] While "truth" and "meaning" exist within the stories, they are multivocal truths. Serving as *Almanac*'s liminal touchstone is a quality embedded within American Indian cultures that promotes harmonious blending and co-existence of disparate and discordant ideas. Paula Gunn Allen points out that it

> is reasonable, from an Indian point of view, that all literary forms should be interrelated, given the basic idea of the unity and relatedness of all the phenomena of life. Separation of parts into this or that category is not agreeable to American Indians and the attempt to separate essentially unified phenomena results in distortion. (62)

According to Allen, the "two forms basic to American Indian literature are the ceremony and myth" (61); in my view, the first formally structures *Almanac* because ceremony operates repetitively to synthesize and unify "all the phenomena of life," which Silko represents by integrating tribal customs with Western philosophies. Allen explains that "the purpose of a ceremony is to integrate: to fuse the individual with his or her fellows, the community of people with that of the other kingdoms, and this larger communal group with the worlds beyond this one" (62). Clearly, Silko's novel, replete with over sixty characters and nearly as many intermingled story-lines, works to integrate individuals with the earth, animals, art, and each other.

For Silko, history, political ideologies, spiritual beliefs, even military tactics blend rather than form categorical divisions because each is composed by and comprised of narrative. Connection to the spirits, inherent in Native American cultures and central to *Almanac*'s political principles, is communicated through narrative. Silko tells us that "there's

a kind of living spirit in stories" (Perry 324); her belief that their energy motivates political, personal, and social transformations underlies a sanguine assumption embedded in *Almanac*. Also, Allen's explanation of "mythic narrative" or "ritual [in a literary context] ... as a language construct that contains the power to transform something (or someone) from one state or condition to another" (103) frames Silko's text.

Representing many of this text's complex sexual, cultural, and political ideas, the character of Angelita is a leader of the people's revolution who relies on "the ancestors' spirits ... summoned by the stories" as much, if not more, than she does on conventional military strategies.[5] A disciple of Marx, she was drawn to him because he "understood what tribal people had always known" (*A* 520): "the stories of the people or their 'history' had always been sacred, the source of their entire existence ... [and] within 'history' reside relentless forces, powerful spirits" (*A* 315, 316). If the stories can be healing and curative, they can also inspire political metamorphoses and revolution: "stories of depravity and cruelty were the driving force of the revolution, not the other way around" (*A* 316). Comparing him to a shaman, Silko transforms the western concept of Marx, political thinker and intellectual, into "tribal man and storyteller" (*A* 521).[6]

Significantly, *Almanac*'s manipulation of Marx's manipulation of stories introduces *repetition*, which, as I will explain, becomes a way to understand "the interlocking of the basic forms ... be they literary forms, species, or persons" (Allen 62) inherent in American Indian life; within her use of repetition, Silko's "interlocking forms" include paradigms and belief systems that appear radically disparate, such as an enjambment of the original Mayan almanacs with psychoanalytic theory. Silko renders her point regarding repetition in this way: Angelita imagines Marx "as a *storyteller who worked feverishly to gather together a magical assembly of stories to cure the suffering and evils of the world by the retelling of the stories*" (*A* 316; emphasis added). Two hundred pages later, Silko tells us again that Marx was "*feverishly working to bring together a powerful, even magical, assembly of stories. In the repetition of the workers' stories lay great power … power to move millions of people*" (*A* 520; emphasis added). Undoubtedly and emphatically, Silko is calling attention to the concept of repetition. First, she actually repeats, almost word for word, identical images; then she highlights, in both passages, the enormous power residing within the retelling and the repetition of the stories. Repetition is not a trope in *Almanac*; it is a meta-narrative device contouring the novel's structure through enactment. And as Paula Gunn Allen points out, this is precisely how repetition works within ceremony.

Silko invites readers to explore, even play with multiplicitous meanings/readings/interpretations of repetition in order to stress an important aspect of American Indian literary theory: opposing ideas can and must exist simultaneously side by side. One particular reading of repetition is Allen's. Within ceremony (as of course Silko well knows),

> repetition operates like the chorus in Western drama, serving to reinforce the theme and to focus the participants' attention on central concerns while intensifying their involvement with the enactment. One suits one's words and movements (if one is a dancer) to the repetitive pattern. Soon breath, heartbeat, thought, emotion, and word are one. The repetition integrates or fuses, allowing thought and word to coalesce into one rhythmic whole. (63)

Understanding repetition differently, Freud discusses the "compulsion to repeat" in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) in which he writes that the psychoanalytic patient is "obliged to *repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of … *remembering* it as something belonging to the past" (12).

Silko refers to Freud throughout her novel as well as in interviews (see Perry); she read nearly every volume of his work during a break from writing *Almanac* and incorporates into her novel his concept of "repetition"—an essential and fundamental aspect of Freud's theory.[7] In psychoanalytic language, the repetition compulsion is an unconscious defense mechanism fueled by hope that the obsessive repetition of an act will transform its original, painful outcome to a more tolerable one. Perhaps she attributes the intergenerational evil inflicted by the Destroyers, who are without histories/stories/memories from their ancestors, to their repression of all links to their pasts. Thus they blindly and unceasingly repeat the violence of their predecessors instead of remembering it as something rooted in another time. A superb example of cultural, intergenerational violence "could be seen in Israel, where Palestinians kept in prison camps were tortured and killed by descendants of Jewish holocaust survivors" (*A* 546). As Silko reminds us throughout her novel, neither individuals nor civilizations can survive severance from their histories.[8]

Although Freud and Allen read repetition quite differently—Freud suggests one uses it to "alter the outcome" of an unhappy experience or trauma, while Allen describes its contribution to Native American ceremony as inducing an "hypnotic state of consciousness" allowing the ceremonial participant to devote his/her complete attention to "becom-

[ing] literally one with the universe" (62)—*Almanac*'s capacity to contain such an unconventional blending of views exemplifies, actually realizes, an integrative aspect of American Indian literature. Suggestive of Bakhtin's concept of dialogics which recognizes conflicting conversations within a text, Silko's use of repetition does more than simply identify multivocality. She politicizes the "voices" and offers an admonitory vision of the inevitable destruction of Western civilization when the dialogical system breaks down.

Pivotal to my discussion on repetition is its presence in the original, ancient almanacs, the prototype for *Almanac of the Dead*.[9] In fact, Silko invokes repetition as she observes it: "the Mayan almanacs had really strong images that are often repeated. … A lot of the remnants covered war, destruction, politics, war, destruction, politics" (Perry 326). I suggest one reason the images and stories were repeated both in the original almanacs and in Silko's contemporary one is that, in American Indian cultures, the "stories are alive. … There's a kind of living spirit in [them] that can't be seen," but they must be told and retold as "whole" because the living spirit is only "there when the story is all together ... if you break the words apart and say, 'Where is the spirit?' ... it is like pulling a human apart and saying, 'Does this make you alive, does this make you alive?'" (Silko in Perry 324). Juxtaposing conflicting ideas within her text, Silko accentuates an important difference between Westerners and Native Americans. Obsessed with exclusiveness, separateness, and hierarchical divisions, Western values contrast sharply with those of American Indians that are grounded in and strive for an inclusive, communal, spiritual connectedness with the entire universe.

Silko's rendering of Marx as both tribal Jew and European allows him to inhabit both Native and Western worlds. Depicting him "feverishly working to bring together a powerful, even magical, assembly of stories" calls attention to precisely what Silko herself is doing. Her task is identical to the one she ascribes to Marx:

> Word by word, [his] stories of suffering, injury, and death had transformed the present moment, seizing listeners' or readers' imaginations so that for an instant, they were present and felt the suffering of sisters and brothers long past. The words of the stories filled rooms with an immense energy that aroused the living with fierce passion and determination for justice. (*A* 520)

Having said that *Almanac* is her "seven-hundred-sixty-three page indictment for five hundred years of theft, murder, pillage, and rape"

(Silko qtd. in Perry 327), Silko relies on the structure of the almanacs—the uses of words, stories, and history—to predict and warn readers of the approaching revolution that she believes will come (as, in fact, it did in Chiapas), and to inspire political and social action. She, like Marx, uses stories to "arouse the living with fierce passion and determination for justice." Likewise, Silko uses myth and history to teach the history of U.S. and European imperialism. Recording over three hundred years of insurrections by black and Indian slaves, *Almanac* reveals a past that most white people prefer to ignore—a compelling reason, Silko feels, to write about "America's fascination with blood and violent death" (Perry 327).

In Silko's war novel, the extinction of art is represented through unrestrained sadistic and bloodthirsty images. Her capitalistic Destroyers, also called Gunadeeyahs, murderous and cannabilistic sorcerers who appeared in Mexico thousands of years before the Europeans, needed human offerings to feed their spirits. The Destroyer clan, "excited by the sacrifice victim's feeble struggle" (*A* 759), killed more and lived on broadening their insatiable "appetite for blood and sexual arousal from killing" to include the obliteration of art. Indeed, acting upon the perverted connection that makes, for them, inflicting pain on others work as an aphrodisiac, the Destroyers transform the liminal eroticization of violence into the literal. Their ruthless quest for political power and sexual dominance become one and the same.

Engaging *Almanac* in a discourse on Western and Indian aesthetics, Silko wonders how art is imagined, constructed, deconstructed, and represented in the current apocalyptic time as the twentieth century closes.[10] For her, the divorce of art from humanity, history, and story signals the time for native peoples to rise up because such a rupture indicates clearly that the end of the world is in sight. Gloria Anzaldúa radically states that "in trying to become 'objective,' Western culture made 'objects' of things and people when it distanced itself from them, thereby losing 'touch' with them. This dichotomy is the root of all violence" (37).[11]

Sadistic imagery replaces artistic beauty in a culture that is so consumed with corruption, greed, and individual hedonism that no community for art exists. Controversially, in her choice to render explicit representations of sexual sadism, Silko's rhetoric becomes pornography. Thus, she reclaims for her text and for women's writing, enraged and sexually violent language, a political as well as a narrative maneuver that expresses how a culture injecting sadism into sex and sexuality will destroy itself. While such discourse is used more frequently by male writers, some feminists and non-feminists of both genders will consider

it no victory for women that Silko has broken a gender barrier to include material historically taboo. However, because the language mimics the dehumanizing story it tells–as Bernard Hirsch writes, "for Silko, how a story is told is inseparable from the story itself" (158)–pornography is the deliberate and perfect discourse with which to write the histories as well as the contemporary stories of the Destroyers.

The con-fusion of beauty with bloody violence—I use con-fusion to mean both the merging/conflating of the two as well as the mistaking of one for the other—is a trope throughout *Almanac*. Silko explores the insidious corruption of aesthetic beauty, underscoring the mummification of human life and culture during the Destroyer's reign, by narratively linking exquisite, floral images with pain, sadism and death. The "Eric Series," an explicit example of this con-fusion, is a photography montage taken by David, a contemporary Destroyer, of his former lover Eric, after he commits suicide by shooting himself in the head because of his unrequited love for David. Violence motivates art when David finds and then spends several (for him) delicious hours photographing Eric's mutilated body. Seese discovers the developing prints but does not immediately identify them as pictures of Eric's suicide. She sees a beautiful "field of *peonies and poppies—cherry, ruby, deep purple, black … [a] nude nearly buried in blossoms of bright reds and purples*. The nude human body innocent and lovely as a field of flowers" (*A* 106; emphasis added). As she looks closer she realizes the innocent nude is Eric's dead body, the beautiful flowers his blood and brains—"blood thick, black tar pooled and spattered across the bright white of the chenille bedspread" (*A* 106). When the "Eric Series" is exhibited at an elegant gallery, we meet Seese's exact words in those of an art critic, who draws attention to the "pictorial irony of a field of red shapes which might be *peonies—cherry, ruby, deep purple, black—and the nude human figure nearly buried in these 'blossoms' of bright red"* (*A* 108; emphasis added).

Two very different perspectives produce identical descriptions of the photographs. By recognizing that the photograph is neither Eric nor an artistic representation of him, Seese "sees" through the presentation; and the chapter, named from her perspective, is called "Suicide." Unlike her, the art critic knows precisely what s/he is looking at, but does not see in the sense that Seese does. The Destroyer critic is reviewing Destroyer art and loves it. The photographic fusion of sadism, blood, and suicide shows David's creative brilliance, according to the review, and he is highly praised both for his artistic expression and for his "clinical detachment" (*A* 107). This chapter, from the reviewer's position, is called "Art."

The flowery metaphors—buds and blossoms—simultaneously

undermine and expand "feminine" symbols by combining them with violent and violating imagery. This fusion is radical both in the literal meaning of radical (change from the root) and in the political, revolutionary sense. The resplendent yet torturous representations warn, as do the ancient almanacs, of imminent destruction. Lecha explains to Seese that "Freud had sensed the approach of the Jewish holocaust in the dreams and jokes of his patients" (*A* 174), reminding us that deciphering the stories of the unconscious converges with reading the clues from the old almanacs. And Seese, the first Caucasian to read the almanacs, represents the possibility of hope or redemption for white people through her unfeigned interest in the ancient pages.[12]

Contrary to every other white character in the book (most notably Max and Leah Blue, Serlo, and Beaufrey), Seese—See-er/Seer/Cease—shuns the perverted merger of loveliness and sadism that comprises Destroyer "art." When she is pregnant with Monte, she has a nightmare about a previous pregnancy ending in an abortion, arranged and paid for by Beaufrey. The nightmarish images of blood, surgical knives, paralysis and death culminate in her dream that "dozens of yellow rosebuds have been scattered over a hospital bed with white sheets. The rosebuds have wilted, and the edges of the petals have dried up" (*A* 52) before they blossom, reflecting Seese's feelings about her aborted/"ceased" fetus. Among the Europeans, Seese alone does not embrace torture/ blood/murder. Death and pain do not seduce her even when they come packaged in superficial beauty–a clue from Silko that Seese "sees" and "understand[s] more than you think" (*A* 24). Surprisingly, she joins with native characters who possess what Anzaldúa calls "*la facultdad*—the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface" (38). Although she starts out a Destroyer, even naming her murdered baby after Montezuma, Seese evolves through her relationship with Lecha. However, despite the significance of Seese's transformation, the rescue of white people is certainly not *Almanac*'s central worry.

Early in the novel, when Lecha warns Seese that "nothing happens by accident here" (*A* 21), Silko emphatically cautions the reader to pay close attention to everything. Every aspect of life on the ranch may be encrypted, and it is incumbent upon the reader, as it is on Seese, to carefully decipher it. For example: the reader learns on page forty-three that Seese has a special ability to understand math. Yet, not for another seven hundred pages do we learn that this tiny clue into her personality adumbrates her entire metamorphosis: "She got lost in the lines and equations; she could imagine any number of possibilities from all the

signs and symbols. She read many things into them, many more than mathematicians had anticipated. Now she knows that all of it is a code anyway" (*A* 43).[13] In retrospect, Seese's capacity to understand codes places her immediately in harmony with the ancient almanacs–a potential that perhaps Lecha, with or without the help of her psychic powers, recognized in Seese—and would explain the unlikely choice of a young, white woman as the almanacs' transcriber. Additionally, Seese's ability to interpret the codes recalls the first description we have of the Mayan almanacs. "Through the decipherment of ancient tribal texts of the Americas the Almanac of the Dead foretells the future of all Americas. The future is encoded in arcane symbols and old narratives" (*A* n. pag.). In fact, an encrypted passage opens *Almanac*. Tipping over the stereotype of "women's workplace," the book introduces Lecha and Zeta in their kitchen which, "because of recent developments" (*A* 20), is piled high not with food, but with guns and drugs. Black dye, not soup, simmers on the stove. The implications of this are endless until, near the close of the novel, we realize that the twin sisters' kitchen is one of many headquarters for the war preparations undertaken by the people's armies. Only by completing the book do we detect that organized political revolution to win back the continent has been its centripetal force all along. Silko's story does "not run in a line for the horizon but circle[s] and spiral[s] instead like the red-tailed hawk" (*A* 224).[14] Revolting against and revolted by the Destroyers' urgent "need" to oppress and inflict pain, Seese "ceases" the reign of the Destroyers, first unconsciously through her inability to mother the next generation of Montes, and then consciously when she casts in her lot with Lecha and the revolution.

The pleasure/pain nexus repeats intergenerationally in *Almanac*. "Violence begat violence, but if the Destroyers were not stopped, the human race was finished" (*A* 739) is an echoing and haunting trope throughout this text. Individual and systemic "Destroyers" seek sexual pleasure through sadism. In so doing the irresistible wish to hurt, abuse, or violate engages the oppressor into objectifying victims. In *America without Violence*, Michael Nagler notes that dominators "dehumanize their intended victims and look on them not as people but as inanimate objects" (qtd. in Tanner 33), permitting the Destroyer to hurt and kill without acknowledging the victim's subjectivity. In a remarkable explanation of genocide, highlighting Nagler's point, Silko explains that if the oppressor cannot annihilate his targeted race entirely, he can infect it with the sadistic, even eroticized urge to become an oppressor and then watch it destroy itself over generations. The best example of this is in the

passage cited earlier:

> The most persuasive evidence of the Third Reich's success could be seen in Israel, where Palestinians kept in prison camps were tortured and killed by descendants of Jewish holocaust survivors. The Jews might have escaped the Third Reich, but now they had been possessed by the urge to inflict suffering and death. Hitler had triumphed. (*A* 546)

While reminding Seese that "Freud had been one of the first to appreciate the Western European appetite for the sadistic eroticism and masochism of modern war" (*A* 174), Lecha indicts Christianity when she tells her that Jesus Christ *embodies* sexual sado-masochism; and we know from the old almanacs that long before Christ, the Gunadeeyahs sexually "craved more death and more dead bodies to open and consume" (*A* 760). Atavistic Menardo, a contemporary Destroyer quenching his thirst for blood with money, exposes his bond with the Gunadeeyahs near the beginning of the text when he "touched the dead" (*A* 760), a phrase Silko repeats at the novel's close to indicate the signature of the Destroyers and their followers.[15] As the yearning to kill spreads, any possibility for humankind to co-exist with/on the earth evaporates.

Anathema to Indian life and cultures is the belief that one could survive a complete severance from Mother Earth. Even so, the white man ripped her open to search for uranium, and in so doing committed suicide by making her incapable of caring for her children.[16] Several contemporary texts, written by women, such as Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986) and *Alias Grace* (1996), Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1975), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) and *The Color Purple* (1982), and Shay Youngblood's *Soul Kiss* (1997), manifest an agonizing, and often irreparable, rupture with the mother figure or the maternal world. Menardo's alienation from the earth parallels and results from his self-imposed detachment, not literally from his mother this time, but from his grandfather, a maternal figure, who nurtures and cares for him.

In a dramatic departure from every section of this text both preceding and succeeding it–and itself comprising fewer than two full pages–Silko gives the *only* first person narrative voice to Menardo, which he gives to his Indian grandfather, fondly called "the old man." The old man told stories of how his ancestors saw "it" coming and Menardo tells the reader directly: "*I* was a young child, *I* felt frightened. ... *I* interrupted to ask what

'it' was" (*A* 257; emphasis added). Let me emphasize that in my view this rhetorical switch is conscious and intentional, not an example of what Alice Jardine calls a "tear in the fabric," "slippage" in the narrative (25, 26), or a moment in which the author has lost control of her text. "It" is the reign of "Death-Eye Dog" or "Fire-Eye Macaw," whose stories refer to domination by Evil, by the Destroyers/Gunadeeyahs/Europeans. What is Silko encoding in Menardo's first person account of the old man's story of the Europeans? I suggest that the story (given below) links the Judeo-Christian first person and the narrative/grammatical first person with feelings of abandonment and betrayal that, according to the old man, cause and reflect cruelty in the Europeans, and lead them to disrespect the Earth. Although the story itself is in the third person, it is discussed from the perspective of the listening child, Menardo, not that of the omniscient narrator.

> Their God had created them but was soon furious with them, throwing them out of their birthplace, driving them away. The ancestors had called Europeans 'the orphan people' and had noted that as with orphans taken in by selfish or coldhearted clanspeople, few Europeans had remained whole. They failed to recognize the earth was their mother. Europeans were like their first parents, Adam and Eve, wandering aimlessly because the insane God who had sired them had abandoned them. (*A* 258)

If the old man's story is a cautionary tale, so is the one that Silko tells to punctuate the moment in Menardo's childhood when he discovers that the taunts of "flat nose," hurled at him by other children, are attributable to his grandfather being Indian. Since this means that all the adored stories about his ancestors are about Indians, Menardo abandons his grandfather because, if it were not for the child's nose, he could pass for *sangre limpia*. Following the old man's death, he makes up a story that his nose never healed from a boxing injury and, from then on, Menardo "passes" for white.

Betraying his history, Menardo loses access to the "ancestors' spirits [which] were summoned by the stories" (*A* 316), and he is "lost" like the aimless Adam and Eve in the old man's story. His childhood deception serves to foreshadow the disasters he will mastermind as an influential and rich Destroyer, suggesting that his visionary grandfather, who "recognized evil, whatever name you called it" (*A* 259), "knew" that Menardo could be seduced by greed; the old man tells him the powerful tale of the "orphan people" to alert his grandson to the critical weakness

that will kill him. But Menardo's fatal flaw is his inability to translate messages; in Anzaldúa's language, he has no "awareness of the part of the psyche that … communicates in images and symbols" (38), as Seese has. Unable to decipher the old man's stories, he then refuses to heed the snake's warning of death in his dreams. His estrangement from him"self" and his ancestry culminates in his crazy and narcissistic invasion of the jungle in order to construct a mansion architecturally designed to imitate the Mayan pyramid found today in the ruins at Chichén Itzá.[17] Neither Menardo nor Alegría, the mansion's architect, realize that they are blatantly disrespecting a sacred temple, nor do they know that during the spring and autumn equinoxes, a great stone serpent appears on the staircase of the original Mayan pyramid. "A series of triangles on the north staircase becomes an undulating serpent as the shadows fall upon it!"[18] Judith Sanders explains that "Alegría's creation is a temple not to a god and to time, like its Mayan prototype, but to money. It is a temple to Capitalism" (3). Perhaps the paragraphs in Menardo's voice, the opening page of the "Mexico" section of *Almanac*, emphasize the profound crossroads when the child abandons his grandfather, his mother–the earth –and is reborn a Destroyer, a critical and pernicious moment for him and for everyone. He pays for his betrayal with his life in a bizarre murder/ suicide—among the most insane deaths in the book—because he betrays not only his grandfather, his nation and the earth, but himself.[19] Although Alegría physically survives, she has only her rubies—no soul.

Before the Europeans came to this continent, the warning snake that Menardo fears and Alegría thinks exists to provide her with shoes, brings the essential, final message: "*what I have to tell you now is that this world is about to end*" (*A* 135). But several hundred years and pages later, the snake's return represents hope for Native Americans who find themselves in the very peculiar position of preparing for an attack upon the white people to get back their own stolen land.

> The time had arrived more quickly than any of the people had ever dreamed, and yet, all the forces had begun to converge. … A giant stone serpent had appeared overnight near a well-traveled road in New Mexico. … Religious people from many places had brought offerings to the giant snake, but none had understood the meaning of the snake's reappearance; no one had got the message. (*A* 702, 703)

Predicting the end of all things European in America, *Almanac* concludes with optimism. If "the snake was looking south, in the direction from which the twin brothers and the people would come" (*A* 763), so,

too, can the reader look south to Chiapas to witness rebellion leading to the fulfillment of the novel's/the old peoples'/the snake's prophesies. Remembering George Collier's question that opens this essay–how do we understand the special fascination with *Almanac* in Chiapas–we see that, like many before her, Silko invokes the power of the stories to bring not only a message, but a crucial warning. The ancient almanacs predict that:

> One day a story will arrive in your town. There will always be disagreement over direction—whether the story came from the southwest or the southeast. The story may arrive with a stranger, a traveler thrown out of his home country months ago. Or the story may be brought by an old friend, perhaps the parrot trader. But after you hear the story, you and the others prepare by the new moon to rise up against the slave masters. (*A* 578)

If the almanacs, the snake, Yoeme's notebooks, Lecha's psychic powers, the Barefoot Hopi, Awa Gee, Rose, and Wilson Weasel Tail all bring life-changing and world-changing stories, then, of course, so does Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*.

NOTES

[1]In her recent collection of essays, *Yellow Woman and A Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today* (1996), Silko addresses an "An Expression of Profound Gratitude to the Maya Zapatistas, January 1, 1994." She writes that the rebel fighters in Chiapas are participating in the "same [five hundred year] war of resistance that the indigenous people of the Americas have never ceased to fight" (153).

[2]Marcos' pessimistic press release regarding the current peace negotiations reads: "We are sure the government does not want a real solution. We are not talking the same language. The government identifies peace with submission, with humiliation, with surrender" on the part of the rebels (*The Boston Globe* October 19, 1995). His absence from the talks held in San Cristobal, beginning on October 18, 1995, was not explained. At the earlier talks, in the spring of 1995, his absence was attributed to ill-health.

[3]My use of the term "unconscious" is intended to include non-Western concepts that refer to encrypted or encoded strata of the mind, which reveal themselves through dreams, symbols, or images. An example is what Gloria Anzaldúa calls *la facultdad*. I use the term, also, as it is understood in contemporary Western, psychoanalytic discourse: "irrational" thoughts and feelings

repressed from consciousness.

[4]Obviously there are numerous Native American cultures and tribes. I write collectively of Native American cultures only when research reveals that the particular tradition I am discussing inheres in nearly all, if not all tribes. For example, while particular ceremonies vary from tribe to tribe, the tradition of ceremony and of ceremonial ritual is inherent to all the Native American cultures that I researched.

[5]Leslie Marmon Silko, *Almanac of the Dead* (New York: Penguin, 1991) 316; all further citations are to this edition and abbreviated as *A* in the text. Inspired by the ancestors' stories, Angelita is also a shrewd and successful fund-raiser. She is aware of "all sources of 'direct' and 'humanitarian' aid ... from foreign governments to multinational corporations" (*A* 471).

[6]In their shared view of stories as generative—"the driving force of the revolution"—Silko instinctively links Angelita and Marx with EZLN leader, Subcomandante Marcos. While Angelita, Marx, and Marcos are scholars of revolutionary ideology, they wait for messages from the dead ancestors and the "earth's natural forces" (*A* 518) to determine the time for rebellion. I use the word "instinctively" because *Almanac* was published almost three years before the EZLN uprising. But of course it is possible that Silko *was* aware of the impending insurrection in Chiapas and quite deliberately incorporated a disguised Marcos into her text.

[7]Feeling stuck and disheartened as she approached the end of the ten years she spent writing *Almanac*, Silko took a break in order to read eighteen volumes of Freud, the influence of which, I suggest, she weaves through the entire tapestry of this text. She finished the novel shortly after.

[8]For her excellent example of cultural repression, see Silko's interview with Donna Perry in *BackTalk* (1993). In a discussion concerning the dangers inherent in white peoples' capacity to "forget"/repress that aspect of United States history resulting in the Indians' genocide, she said that "one of the tragedies of the United States [is]—a sort of collective amnesia about the past, sort of like the Germans during the Jewish Holocaust" (321).

[9]The best known version of the remaining almanacs is the Popul Vuh (Council Book) of the Quiché Maya of Guatemala: *Popul Vuh: The Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life*, translated by Dennis Tedlock, 1985.

[10]In its depth, ambition and sophistication, *Almanac* stands with a growing number of long, difficult contemporary novels by American women–Rebecca Goldstein, Maxine Hong Kingston, Toni Morrison, Joyce Carol Oates, Carol Shields, Alice Walker–which bring together, with an urgency perhaps attributable to the close of the twentieth century, complex, disquieting and disparate ideas. The intersection of or relationship between art and violence is an issue central to the recent work of most of these writers.

[11]A good example of Anzaldúa's point regarding the violence invoked by objectifying and commodifying art is found in the story of the stone figures

known as the "little grandparents" made by kachina spirits and stolen from the Lagunas by anthropologists. They later show up in a museum behind glass.

[12]Significantly, the original almanacs are written on parchment made from horse gut, while the current copy is being transcribed onto computer disks. Reminding us that what is of real value will endure, Silko, at the same time, undermines the stereotype of the passive, slow Indian by linking the ancient with the technologically modern.

[13]In describing a similar phenomenon in *The Mill on The Floss*, George Eliot describes Maggie Tulliver's ability to "decode" Latin and make it her own.

[14]See Bernard Hirsch who refers to Silko's narrative strategy as "accretion" (154). Interesting and descriptive, his theory complements Allen's theory of "accretive ritual structure" explained in *The Sacred Hoop*. Western feminist theorists, such as Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, or Alice Jardine, might interpret Silko's writing as "from the female body": circular, cyclical, non-linear. But Silko chooses to unite her storytelling with the spiraling red-tailed hawk, a coded, visual, and personal description. In its accommodation of all kinds of disparate concepts, *Almanac* is an excellent example of Bakhtin's idea of the novel as a "baggy Monster" (*Dialogism* xviii) having room for everything.

[15]All the Destroyers astonishingly "touched death." Beaufrey murders baby Monte, then harvests and sells his organs. Trigg murders homeless men. He pays them to donate their blood to his profit-earning plasma center, and as the blood drains from their unaware bodies, he performs fellatio on them.

[16]Severance from the earth is demonstrated in its extreme through Serlo's psychotic scheme to construct Alternative Earth modules designed to orbit around the earth during the war to protect those of "superior lineage." They are "self-sufficient, closed systems, capable of remaining cut off from earth for years if necessary" (*A* 543).

[17]I want to thank Judith Sanders for bringing this very important point to my attention.

[18]*Lonely Planet Guide to Mexico* 1989, qtd. in Judith Sanders "Response to *Almanac of the Dead*" unp. 1994.

[19]Menardo's death, attributable to his betrayal of his history and his ancestors' spirits, forecasts the assassination of Bartolomeo later in the novel. He, too, abandons his history, denying that anything of importance took place in Cuba prior to Castro, and in the only incident of organized violence on the part of the native people, Bartolomeo is hanged in front of the people he betrayed.

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Overturning the (New World) Order: Of Space, Time, Writing, and Prophecy in Leslie Marmon Silko's Almanac of the Dead

Yvonne Reineke

> Books have been the focus of the struggle for the control of the Americas from the start.
>
> [Leslie Marmon Silko, *Yellow Woman and the Beauty of the Spirit*]

A series of current debates in the areas of cultural and feminist studies, anthropology, history, geography, and literary theory, among others, have clustered around the adequacy of the term "postcolonial" for describing changing configurations of power relations in previously colonized countries around the globe. What exactly is the meaning of the prefix "post" in this case? As with other terms that carry their troublesome "post" before them (postmodernism or poststructuralism), the crossing of meanings and definitions of what rightly constitutes the "postcolonial" proliferate. Does it mean the time after colonial power has withdrawn or been defeated, that is, the time after independence? Does it mean a series of resistances and practices that take place within and beyond colonial rule? How applicable is it to the struggles of Native peoples in the U.S.? Or more insidiously, from whose point of view is something postcolonial? The colonizer, too, may have a dream of the "postcolonial," the mythic moment at which colonization is total and the colonizer's power absolute. Most often, the discussions address the postcolonial as an issue of time, rather than space.[1]

But perhaps the term can and should be viewed differently, incorporated into Native terms, or into what Gordon Brotherston describes as the cosmology of the Fourth World. Put differently, what happens to it if it is

cast into the realm of Native American prophecy, such as is outlined in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*? Through a reading of the scene of the almanac's journey north in Silko's novel, I wish to examine the intersections between spatio-temporal dimensions and the almanac of prophecies inscribed by them. By highlighting writing, "books" (the Mayan codices), and prophecy in the Americas prior to and after contact, Silko challenges Western evolutionary models of time, space, and writing (history, geography, literacy) that have held sway and served to justify colonization of "nonliterate" cultures.

However, before turning to *Almanac of the Dead*, I want to outline reflections and articulations on the conception of abstract space and linear time in Western philosophical thought. Jonathan Boyarin, in an essay entitled "Space, Time, and the Politics of Memory" suggests that, despite new directions that physics has posed for our sense of time/space, such as the challenges of quantum mechanics and the theory of relativity, many of us in the West generally operate in the daily world and in our social and political lives as if "Cartesian space" inhered. That is, we tend to separate out time and space. Boyarin observes that recent work in political science suggests that "there are close genealogical links between the 'Cartesian coordinates' of space and time and the discrete, sovereign state, both associated with European society since the Renaissance. These links include relations of mapping, boundary setting, inclusion, and exclusion, practices in which the tradition of social research is closely involved" (4). Moreover, we assume that space is made up of three dimensions, and time is made up of a forward motion—a kind of arrow unidirectional and inexorable in its movement.

The dominant Eurocentric paradigm is a thus linear model which progresses inevitably from past to present to future. In this schema, one year follows upon another in a sequential order which can be "mapped" on an imaginary timeline. Each mark (or point in time) on the line is geographically plotted equidistant from the previous and subsequent mark. Moreover, each mark is distinct, and no point ever returns to a prior point in space. Eventually, the line becomes a map which spatially organizes our conceptualization of time. Consequently, the space between a past event and the present becomes increasingly longer as time "progresses."

This linear conception of time undergirds European modernity and its concomitant discourses of progress and enlightenment.(2) Another social theorist, Enrique Dussel, discussing postmodernity and Latin America, asserts that European modernity came into being at the fateful moment of contact in 1492: the moment at which Europe suddenly has a

clearly demarcated "periphery" and an "other" by which to define itself as center, and as a "unified ego exploring, conquering, [and] colonizing an alterity that gave back its image of itself" (66). He traces the philosophical roots of the dominant paradigm of time in the philosopher Hegel's discussion of Universal History:

> Development is dialectically linear: It is a primordially ontological category, particularly in the case of World History. It has, moreover, a direction in *space* [my emphasis]: 'The movement of Universal History goes from the East to the West. Europe is the absolute end of Universal History. Asia is its beginning. (68-69)

In North America, in what is now the U.S., the nineteenth-century rhetoric of Manifest Destiny, another metanarrative of progress, hailed the direction of development similarly—from East to West, "Go West, young man!" and with genocidal consequences. Similar, too, to Hegel, was the ordering of a hierarchy of "races of Man"—with whites (Anglo-Americans) representing the pinnacle of civilization and enlightened values.

Just as Hegel's "Universal History" and western temporality are not value-free concepts, neither is the western form of mapping a neutral or universal description of space. Rather, it is a particular ordering of knowledge, and hence, ideological. The order (or use and demarcation of space) itself embodies the designs of the mapmaker. As J.B. Harley notes,

> For historians … a map is a 'social construction of the world expressed through the medium of cartography.' Far from holding up a simple mirror of nature that is true or false, maps redescribe, "the world —like any other document—in terms of relations of power and of cultural practices, preferences, and priorities. What we read on a map is as much related to an invisible social world and to ideology as it is to phenomena seen and measured in the landscape. (4)

Feminist geographers Alison Blunt and Gillian Rose, in *Writing Women and Space: Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies*, note that the mapping process of European colonialism derives its power precisely by representing itself as a transparent mirror of nature. Mimetic representation creates the illusion that what is being mapped is transparently and simply there, passively waiting to be "discovered," viewed, and conquered. The very transparency of mimetic representation is what disguises the fact that what is being mapped is done so from a particular point of view, or vantage point. Using the work of Johannes Fabian, Blunt and

Rose observe that:

> European modernity and European imperialism share a law of identical temporality, which positions all places on a hierarchy of progress toward 'civilization' as represented by Europe. As we have argued, they also share a similar notion of space. Through transparent space, all places can be mapped in terms of their relationship to Europe. Imperialist maps not only describe colonies; they also discipline them through the discursive grids of Western power/knowledge. (15)

Indeed, one of the ways by which the dominant notion of mapping disguises itself as "neutral" is precisely through its claim of "objectively" measuring and representing the landscape. In this sense, it shares a crucial connection with the discourse of science with its reliance on "objectivity," empiricism, and the supposedly neutral collection and advancement of knowledge. In fact, such assumptions and discourses are deployed by scientists participating in the Human Genome Diversity Project, providing a uncannily real-world example of the kind of neocolonialist and capitalist mapping that Silko's novel seeks to challenge.

Despite critiques of metanarratives (such as Hegel's), Western science's will to power/knowledge continues apace in various postmodern forms of mapping. According to an article published several years ago in *The Lakota Times*, the U.S. National Institute of Health is lending its backing to the Human Genome Organization (acronym HUGO), a project that seeks to "map" the human genetic structure. HUGO will collect white blood cells and tissue samples from "endangered" peoples throughout the world. The blood matter and tissue will be packed in ice to be preserved, or in their words "immortalized." In this manner, different genetic groups can and will be "mapped."[2]

More bloodchilling yet is the language from a draft report of October 29, 1992, which notes:

> the establishment of permanent cell lines needs to be explained in terms that are understandable, but that do not mislead subjects in any population. English terms such as "immortalization of cell lines" can be badly misunderstood. ... [S]imilarly, there is no fully acceptable way to refer to populations that are in danger of physical extinction or disruption as integral genetic units (gene pools). ... In this Report, we refer to such groups as "Isolates of Historic Interest" because they represent groups that should be sampled before they disappear as integral units so that their role in human

history can be preserved.

The language employed by HUGO's project of genetic mapping resonates with nineteenth-century melancholic and nostalgic echoes: the "Native," who has "gone the way of History" or who has passed out of existence because such is "nature's course," a favored topos in nineteenth-century poetry. In this, the late twentieth-century version, the "Native" now becomes the "isolate of Historic Interest," whose role in human history must be preserved through a DNA sample. As in the nineteenth century, the subject, the "Native," is objectified and robbed of agency. This process is similar to the late nineteenth-century's ethnologists' "resourcing" process that Kathryn Milun describes:

> By "resourcing" North America's first inhabitants [collecting their bones, sacred objects], this branch of science [ethnology/archeology] attempted to transform Indian ancestors as *subjects*, whose agential status was still present for their descendants, into *objects*, which were no long capable of active participation in the world. (63)

While the scientists involved may be well intentioned, the discourses of mapping and preservation are historically constructed and not "neutral." In effect, the rhetoric of the Diversity Project treats indigenous peoples as objects for preservation. And indigenous peoples around the world are contesting and resisting this objectification, just as they have been resisting all along.

Mapping the world's indigenous communities' genetic structures, and potentially, under G.A.T.T., taking out patents on human DNA both indicate and remain complicit with the continuation of a five-hundred year "development" project known as colonialism, now known and reconfiguring itself not as the "discovery" or "encounter" with the "New World" but rather as the "New World Order," or the globalization of capital and property rights.

It is this neocolonialist and capitalist ("New World" Order) that Leslie Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* contests and resists through its own mapmaking of days past and the character of days to come. In so doing, the novel explicitly highlights the continued rich legacy, survival, and knowledge of Fourth World texts, the existence of which Bishop Landa and the Spaniards wished to annihilate in the sixteenth century in his book burning frenzy of the Mayan libraries. *Almanac of the Dead*, not in spite of its title, but indeed because of it, confronts and challenges the Western imperialist treatment of space and its status as "dead."[3] As Boyarin puts

it, "in our commonsense world, what is dead is past. The 'death' of space, the closure of geographical knowledge in the culmination of modern imperialism around the turn of the twentieth century, may therefore be linked to the notion that once being 'fixed,' *known*, it is thereby 'past'" (9). *Almanac of the Dead* insists on time and space as living, and hence, as moving time through space. In this way, it is directly linked to Fourth World mapmaking and texts, which as Gordon Brotherston suggests, "sooner trace process and formation, like histories, setting politics into cosmogony" (82).

Of Almanacs, Maps, and Prophecy

> This is the map of the forsaken world.
> This is the world without end
> where forests have been cut away from their trees.
> These are the lines wolf could not pass over.
> This is what I know from science:
> that a grain of dust dwells at the center
> of every flake of snow,
> that ice can have its way with land,
> that wolves live inside a circle
> of their own beginning.
> This is what I know from blood:
> the first language is not our own.
> There are names each thing has for itself,
> and beneath us the other order already moves.
> It is burning.
> It is dreaming.
> It is waking up.
>
> (from Linda Hogan's poem, "Map")

Sprawling across five hundred years, and its writing sprawling over a ten-year period, and emerging for publication in the year of Columbus' quincentennary, Silko's novel follows the movements of numerous characters (more than eighty) in the Americas, many of whom eventually converge on Tucson, Arizona. The novel ends poised on a brink of something to come: whether peaceful or catastrophic is left open to us as readers.

While its length (seven hundred and sixty-three pages) and scope (Arizona, New Mexico, Mexico, Cuba, Africa, Alaska, and five hundred years of resistance to conquest) are daunting, the novel's title gives clue to its form and theme: as a collection of the stories of individual characters, both living and dead, significant dates, fragments of events, and

prophecies, the novel functions much like the notebooks of the almanac contained within the narrative itself. Repeatedly, the novel highlights the resurgence and emancipation of the colonized and the oppressed by revitalizing, as it were, a pre-existing (pre-colonized) conception of time. Put simply, everything is in the present, or as an excerpt from the almanac notebooks states: "[s]acred time is always in the present" (136). It is in the context of the "sacred present" that all the novel's characters and events (past, present, and future) are related. Thus, an event that occurred over one hundred years ago is "remembered" by various indigenous characters as if it had occurred yesterday. In this case, the Indian characters remember the theft of their homelands that occurred over one hundred years ago as if it had just happened.

This conception of time both clashes and competes with the legal notion of "repose" relied upon by the other characters who make up the tapestry of the novel: "speculators, confidence men, embezzlers, lawyers, judges, police and other criminals, as well as addicts and pushers" who have called Tucson home "since the 1880s and the Apache Wars" (*Almanac*, map). These characters use the passage of time to justify their right to land, and power over indigenous peoples, and other marginalized and oppressed groups. For them, the passage of time provides a real, as well as a kind of moral, statute of limitations. Nevertheless, the novel's insistent message is clear: the passage of time does not diminish indigenous people's call for justice through the return of their homelands.

Almanac of the Dead strategically deploys these two competing paradigms of time against one another. Indeed, Silko quite intentionally sets out to explode the Eurocentric developmental conception of time. In one interview, she states: "I decided I would go ahead and raise hell with linear time." In subsequent interviews, she elaborates on this idea:

> My interest in time comes from my childhood with the old-time people who had radically different views of the universe and reality. For the old-time people, time was not a series of ticks of a clock, one following the other. For the old-time people, time was round—like a tortilla; time had specific moments and specific locations, so that the beloved ancestors who had passed on were not annihilated by death, but only relocated to the place called Cliff House. At Cliff House, people continued as they had always been, although only spirits and not living humans can travel freely over this tortilla of time. All times go on existing side by side for all eternity. No moment is lost or destroyed. There are no future or past times; there are *always all* the times,

> which differ slightly, as the locations on the tortilla differ slightly. The past and the future are the same because they exist only in the present of our imaginations. (137)

Her intent is exemplified early in the novel when we meet Zeta, one of the many main characters. Zeta and her twin sister Lecha are keepers of the ancient notebooks given to them by their Yaqui grandmother Yoeme. In one passage, Zeta reflects on the nature of old age: "The old ones did not believe the passage of years caused old age. They had not believed in the passage of time at all. It wasn't the years that aged a person but the miles and miles that had been traveled in this world" (19-20). Here, the conception of time is explicitly divorced from a linear model, and linked instead, to movement and distances covered.

Indeed, *Almanac of the Dead's* alternative spatial conception is cyclical and in constant revolution. Each day returns to the same space eventually. As one fragment from the ancient notebooks in Lecha's reveals:

> An experience termed past may actually return if the influences have the same balances or proportions as before. Details may vary, but the essence does not change. The day would have the same feeling, the same character, as that day has been described as having had before. The image of a memory exists in the present moment. (574)

The novel's narratives move in much the same way. Each story seems to return to an origin or space that was occupied earlier, or circles around another. The stories told by the old Yaqui woman Mahawala to the character Calabazas exemplify this alternative spatial conception. "Old Mahawala started out, and then the others, one by one had contributed some detail or opinion of alternative version. The story they told did not run in a line for the horizon but circled and spiraled instead like the red-tailed hawk" (224). Through the alternating and intersecting stories, a different kind of map emerges; i.e. one that charts the movements of people and events as relational and simultaneously present in a circle, or on the "tortilla." By "raising hell" with linear time and the "line" of the "horizon," Silko "raises hell" with the dominant spatial conception of time.

Overall, the novel *Almanac of the Dead* enacts the functions of the notebooks and old manuscripts in the possession of Lecha and Zeta; that is, the novel prophetically maps "the identity of days and months to

come" and the identity of the present moment. Like Zeta and Lecha with their notebooks, the reader, through acts of memory, is called upon to transcribe and decode the identity of the present threaded through the novel's multiple, shifting, and intersecting narratives. At one point, for instance, Lecha thinks to herself that "there was evidence that substantial portions of the original manuscript had been lost or condensed into odd narratives which operated like codes" (569). Indeed, the story of the "Journey of the Ancient Almanac" demonstrates the historical loss of portions of the manuscript. Simultaneously, this section encapsulates the themes of space, time, decoding, and writing. The story of the manuscript's journey functions as an analogue for the larger narrative.

In terms of decoding the present, we know that in this story, the children carrying the manuscript pages are escaping from slave catchers and de Guzman, the Butcher. Connections to other sections in the novel abound. Yoeme's husband was also called Guzman, and earlier, through an observation made by another character Calabazas, we are reminded of similarities between the identity of the past days (massacres, slavery, and torture) and ones this century: "Hitler got all he knew from the Spanish and Portuguese invaders. De Guzman was the first to make lamp shades out of human skin" (216). Such connections are woven among the shifting time spans of the novel's narratives, linking the dead with the living and the movements of people then—movements in both senses of the word: actual physical movement and resistance movements—with the movements of people now.

Such time frames and geographies (connecting the contemporary characters across continents) are repeated and linked throughout the novel in numerous ways: through Lecha's psychic abilities to locate the dead, for example, or through the repetition of the warning that "one day a story will arrive at your town. … But when you hear this story, you will know it is the signal for you and the others to prepare" (136) which is repeated with a difference in the section "From the Ancient Almanac" where the last lines now read "but after you hear the story, you and the others prepare by the new moon to rise up against the slave masters" (578). Immediately following this is the story of Yoeme's deliverance from execution because anyone who would kill her has died instead in the influenza of 1918. There is repetition here, too: "the news reaches town. … Influenza travels with the moist, warm winds off the coast" (580). Previously, in the section "From the Old Almanac," we learn of dates of plagues: 1560, 1590, 1621. Like the forewarned story that is to arrive, the plague arrives, and it is the influenza outbreak that helps Yoeme in her struggle: "How fitting that Yoeme had required the worst natural disaster

in world history to save her" (581) thinks Lecha to herself. The cumulative effect of these connections is to teach the act of attention to the essences of events,[4] even if "the details may vary" (574). The children's journey with the manuscript thus repeats in microcosm several larger concerns and events of the novel: paying attention to the nature of the days, learning to be human, being watchful to protect oneself against witchery and sorcerers.

What also becomes apparent through the narration of the journey is the living nature of the book and its relationship to time and movement through space. The children "were told the 'book' they carried was the 'book' of all the days of their people. These days and years were all alive, and all these days would return again. The 'book' had to be preserved at all costs" (247). Even their journey itself, we learn, is included in the notebooks. Time is thus related to movement through space—quite literally with the children's journey northward.

By stressing that the days and years are alive, *Almanac of the Dead* highlights the influence of important texts of Mayan culture: namely, the *Popul Vuh*, or the Council Mat, and *Chilam Balam*, Book of Chumayel. Indeed, Brotherston declares the *Popul Vuh* to be "the Bible of the continent and a major achievement in world literature" (6). The *Chilam Balam Books* are equally significant for chronicling Fourth World history. In drawing upon these books and the Mayan codices, Silko not only maps out a precolonized conception of time and space by linking past and present events to the Mayan system of measuring time, but also draws our attention to Fourth World writing; that is, that this hemisphere has its own sacred texts which tell us how to live. Silko's novel, with its introductory map, stands as a profound challenge to Western hubris regarding the destiny and history of the West and concomitant notions of "development," "civilization," and "progress." In the section entitled "From the Ancient Almanac," we encounter this fragment taken from the *Chilam Balam*:

> The Month was created first, before the World. Then the Month began to walk himself, and his grandmothers and aunt and his sister-in-law said, "What do we say when we see a man in the road?" There were no humans yet so they discussed what they would say as they walked along. They found footprints when they arrived in the East. "Who passed by here? Look at these footprints. Measure them with your foot." The Mother Creator said this to the Month, who measured the footprints. The footprints belong to Lord God. That was the beginning for Month because he had to mea-

> sure the whole World by walking it off day by day. Month made sure his feet were even before he began the count. Month spoke Day's name when Day had no name. So the Month was created, then the Day, as it was called, was created, and the rain's stairway to Earth –the rocks and the trees–all creatures of the sea and land were created. (571)

This creation story, depicting the "solar-walk" as Brotherston notes, is akin to other Native American tribal creation stories. More important are the ways in which the Mayan text and hieroglyphs operate on multiple levels in translation. He points out that *the Chilam Balam* "offers multiple levels of reading that derive directly from hieroglyphic practice and precedent. ..." For instance, "rocks and trees were created on this day" can also mean "molded" on this day. Furthermore, he observes, "the materials that are being invented … stone and wood, may conventionally evoke the art of painting and carving and hence of writing …" so that in "traveling from the east to the zenith, the uinal (Month) not only defines himself in calendrical time but writes himself into existence" (290). In this way, the children traveling North with four pieces of the manuscript are also marking off the calendrical days to return to the days to come.[5]

Furthermore, time is sacred in the Mayan conception and its sacredness is alluded to over and over in *Almanac of the Dead*. Miguel Leon-Portilla, exploring the nature of time in Mayan thought, observes:

> The Maya attributed a divine nature to *kinh*, sun-day-time. The day, and all the cycles, owed their being to the old face with the solar eye, the ascending fire macaw, the jaguar deity or dog, the two latter symbols of the occultation and voyage of the sun through the somber regions of the underworld. In his untiring coming and going through the paths of the universe, *kinh* brings with him attributes and influences belonging to the different periods and moments registered in the inscriptions and codices. Throughout the great "suns" or ages of the world, all the days, the twenty-day periods, the years, the twenty-year periods, and the counts of all possible cycles—these all arrive with their varied messages, the nature of which man must foreknow in order to deal with their good or bad influences. (35)

He emphasizes that the glyphs used in the codices were not merely abstractions, but rather "the faces and supernatural personifications of the good and bad forces unceasingly interacting in the world" (35). Quoting

another Mayan scholar, Eric Thompson, Leon-Portilla underscores their divine nature: "The days are alive; they are personified powers ... and their influences pervade every activity and every walk of life; they are, in truth, very gods" (36).

The story of the manuscript's journey ends with a scene of cannibalism by the old woman with whom the children have stayed. Through Yoeme's warning about the nature of the epoch's god, Death-Eye Dog, the woman is associated with the underworld. In other words, this story has not just been the history of the almanac's journey, but also about the necessity of paying attention to the epoch, or the days. The children, we learn, have been warned that "during the epoch of Death-Eye Dog human beings, especially the alien invaders, would become obsessed with hungers and impulses commonly seen in wild dogs. ... A human being was born into the days she or he must live with until eventually the days themselves would travel on. All anyone could do was recognize the traits, the spirits of the days, and take precautions. The epoch of Death-Eye Dog was male and therefore tended to be somewhat weak and very cruel" (251). She ends her narrative to Lecha with a warning:

> As long as our days belong to Death-Eye Dog, we will continue to see such things. That woman had been left behind by the others. The reign of Death-Eye Dog is marked by people like her. She did not start out that way. In the days that belong to Death-Eye Dog, the possibility of becoming like her trails each one of us. (253)

Several things emerge from this narrative of the almanac within the *Almanac of the Dead*. First, the manuscript is characterized as a living text. It is in fact what sustains–and ultimately saves–the children from starvation and three of them–if not the fourth child–from the old woman. The entire account is intricately layered with continual references to the nourishment derived from the pages of the manuscript: nourishment both physical and spiritual. Made of horse stomach membranes, the almanac's pages reflect the relationship to nature that the tribes had and that the Europeans are severing and, as is repeatedly shown, have severed themselves from. The page the girl drops into the stew, in fact, comes alive: "The thin, brittle page gradually began to change. Brownish ink rose in clouds. Outlines of the letters smeared and then floated up and away like flocks of birds. The surface of the page began to glisten, and brittle, curled edges swelled flat and spread until the top of the stew pot was nearly covered with a section of horse stomach" (249). The clouds

and birds point to the transformation of all things living. As Silko states in another discussion of time: "the flower changes; the changes continue relentlessly. Nothing is lost, left behind, or destroyed. It is only changed" (137). And indeed, the rest of the pages are not left behind, for we, along with Lecha and Zeta, learn from Yoeme that "it had been the almanac that had saved them. The first night, if the eldest had not sacrificed a page from the book, that crippled woman would have murdered them all right then" (252).

Furthermore, Yoeme tells the entire story to Lecha through whom we read the story and now retell it in turn. We also know that Yoeme, Lecha and Zeta, along with another character Seese, are the transcribers of the almanac fragments and earlier transcriptions in the form of notebooks. Hearing this story, and the warnings of the days of Death-Eye Dog we, as readers, become part of the text—we, too, have been warned. Through the embedded narrative of this journey in the larger narrative of the *Almanac of the Dead*, we become an integral part of the story by reflecting on our responsibilities to understand our place in time and space: "the possibility," that is, "of becoming like the old woman" trails us as well.

If the days are alive and return again as the Mayan texts and *Almanac of the Dead* suggest, the days and times can be foreknown and hence people can be forewarned. Understanding this, we can begin to fathom the importance of prophecy in this worldview and the prophetic qualities of the novel. Even the marginalia and additions to the almanac make sense in this context. It is the prophecies which protect the people, as we learn from the snake notebooks, held in Zeta's possession, and said to be the key to the almanac:

> *Spirit Snake's Message*
>
> *I have been talking to you people from the beginning*
> *I have told you the names and identities of the Days and Years.*
> *I have told you the stories on each day and year so you could be prepared*
> *and protect yourselves.*
> *What I have told you has always been true.*
> *What I have to tell you now is that*
> *this world is about to end.*
>
> Those were the last words of the giant serpent. The days that were to come had been foretold. The people scattered. Killers came from all directions. And more killers followed, to kill them. (135)

The section is just one of several from the Snake's Notebook. What each section shares is the act of attention to such elements as time, event, and direction. Again, the quote about the arrival of a story demonstrates these elements: "One day a story will arrive at your town. It will come from far away, from the southwest or southeast—people won't agree (136).

In the section "From the Ancient Almanac," we are given further fragments from the ancient notebooks to decipher; we learn of "clumsy attempts to repair torn pages" and of pages inserted among blank pages to help protect them. Other pages and notations have been added by the keepers of the pages:

> There was evidence that substantial portions of the original manuscript had been lost or condensed into odd narratives that operated like codes. ... Whole sections had been stolen from other books and from the proliferation of "farmer's almanacs" published by patent-drug companies. ... Not even the parchment pages or fragments of ancient paper could be trusted: they might have been clever forgeries, recopied, drawn, and colored painstakingly. (569-70)

What becomes evident from the additions, recopyings, notations of the mad, the efforts to protect the pages, some "splashed with wine, others with water or blood" (569), is the significance of the notebooks down through time for those who were its caretakers. Even if forged and recopied, an act of care has taken place; the last word "painstakingly" signals this. The pages also affect some of their caretakers by driving them mad. And Lecha thinks to herself that there is evidence of fear of the "spirits described in the writing and glyphs on the pages" (569).

For Yoeme, the significance of the notebooks is so great she adds her own story to it. During her stewardship, she had "scribbled arguments in margins with the remarks and vulgar humor Lecha and Zeta had enjoyed so many times with their grandmother" (570). She adds her own pages, believing that:

> power resides within certain stories; this power ensures the story to be retold, and with each retelling a slight but permanent shift took place. Yoeme's story of her deliverance changed forever the odds against all captives; each time a revolutionary escaped death in one century, two revolutionists escaped certain death in the following century even if they had never heard such an escape story. (581)

The scribbled arguments, Yoeme's story, fear, madness, and protection

emphasize the power of the pages, and the interactions between the living text and its caretakers: the almanac is a living entity and like one, grows and changes. Her addition of her escape and the plague also adds another note to understanding the identity of the days in which one lives.

The novel, too, has been a prophetic map. Like the story in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, this is a story that must not be passed on, but must be passed on (in both senses of the word "pass"–to pass it by, or retell it). Indeed, the stories in *Almanac of the Dead* do pass on, as do the days, for the story and map extend beyond the pages of *Almanac of the Dead's* narrative. While writing it, Silko gathered together newspaper clippings of daily events indicative of how the global map has been changing into something known as a (New World) Order in terms of transnational capitalism and N.A.F.T.A. This movement does not necessarily herald a much desired post-colonial moment, so much as it represents the globe in terms of colonial development on a larger scale (or smaller—if we think of the resourcing of human DNA mentioned earlier), or what Indian theorist Vandana Shiva describes in her article "Development as a New Project of Western Patriarchy." Shiva argues that the "dominant mode of perception that creates maldevelopment is based on reductionism, duality, and linearity. It cannot understand equality in diversity" (83). This mode of perception is that of numerous characters in *Almanac of the Dead*; Leah Blue, in particular, comes to mind.

Indeed, we can connect the scene of cannibalism in the story of the almanac's journey northward with other characters in the novel who exploit other people as resources and who mine resources as if the earth were dead space: Trigg, who drains the homeless people of their blood in order to kill them to steal their organs for transplant; Lecha and Zeta's father, the geologist who dies dried up like a mummy after having dug in the bowels of the earth; or Menardo, who so detaches himself from his body and his ancestry, and so fears for his life, that he buys a bulletproof vest and has his driver Tacho shoot at him; or such characters as Beaufrey and Serlo, whose pleasures consist of torturing people and selling videos of mutilation, torture, and murder.

What *Almanac of the Dead* maps out then are the contours of this (New World) Order as it manifests itself in Tucson, Arizona, particularly in terms of the relations between Mexico and the U.S., the shipment of arms and drugs, torture techniques, and the forced movements of indigenous peoples. With its focus on events in the South, the novel as a text which maps the contours and identities of the days, is extremely prescient. Shortly after the novel came out and right on the eve of N.A.F.T.A., the Zapatista rebels staged their uprising, an event Silko

commemorates in her essay "An Expression of Profound Gratitude to the Maya Zapatistas, January 1, 1994."

To end then with the question about space and the postcolonial, I want to argue that *Almanac of the Dead*, like the living pages of the children's almanac, respatializes the "time" of the postcolonial by incorporating (literally taking into its textual body) the term through Fourth World prophecy. That is to say, since prophecies predicted the coming of Europeans and the demise of all things European, the postcolonial space already exists prior to colonization and after it as well; it is mapped, that is, in a cosmological process of which five hundred years, as *Almanac of the Dead* and Silko repeatedly note, is but a small span of time. Discussing the Mayan conception of the universe and human beings' relationship to it, Leon-Portilla writes:

> Maya thought had discovered the measurements of the cycles which the intrinsical order rule whatever happens in the universe. The Divine forces were neither indeterminant nor obscure; their action can be foreseen by means of observations and computations. ... In the inscriptions they commemorated with mathematical rigor the moments in which the action of the god-periods had left their imprint in the world. (107-08)

In a later passage, he notes that for the Maya: "Space and time were inseparable. The spatial universe was an immense stage on which the divine faces and forces were oriented, coming and going in an unbroken order.… The norm of life was to attune with what were and would be the burdens of time" (110).

What *Almanac of the Dead* insistently makes clear is we must watch out for what trails us in these days of Death-Eye Dog, our own burden of time. In the end, the novel suggests, that which may save us is recognizing the sacred time of the present all around us, working towards restoring the balance of the interacting forces, attending to the directions of the snake spirits, and respecting the sanctity of the earth and each other.

NOTES

[1]Homi Bhabha's work offers interesting discussions of space. His "Introduction" and "Conclusion" in *The Location of Culture*, specifically his idea of the "projective past," links up to the functions of prophecy. He takes his inspiration for his theoretical musings from Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and

Beloved's intrusion into the present time and space of her mother Sethe and her sister Denver. While Bhabha's discourse can often be maddeningly elusive, his allusiveness can often open up ways of thinking the relationships between time and space in "postcolonial" textual and political practices. Bhabha is indebted to Walter Benjamin's idea of dialectic at a standstill: "an image is that in which the past and the now flash into a constellation. In other words; image is dialectic at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, that of the past to the now is dialectical—isn't development but image, capable of leaping out" (quoted in Patrick Williams' and Laura Chrisman's "Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: An Introduction," p. 10). Here we can think of the giant stone snake suddenly appearing where none had been seen before. Benjamin's focus on allegory and Jewish mysticism could thus be seen to approach something akin to *Almanac of the Dead's* concerns with prophecy. Bhabha's term of the "projective past" can then be linked with the ancestors, or "the dead" in the novel who are calling out for justice.

For other discussions of the complexities and pitfalls of the term "postcolonial," see Anne McClintock, "The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term 'Postcolonial'" and Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra's "What is Post(-) colonialism?" in *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory*.

[2]For a discussion of the implications and debates surrounding the Human Genome Diversity Project, see the issue of *Cultural Survival Quarterly: World Report on the Rights of Indigenous People and Ethnic Minorities*, Summer 1996, devoted to "Genes, Property and People." See also *Discover*, November 1994, "End of the Rainbow," pp. 71-74.

[3]Elizabeth Cook-Lynn in her book *Why I Can't Read Wallace Stegner and Other Essays*, in the essay of the same name, strongly contests the notion of dead space exemplified in Frederick Turner's 1890 thesis about the "closing of the West" promoted yet again in Wallace Stegner's writings. She writes:

> Because I am an Indian, born and raised on a northern plains Indian reservation in this century, I argue with Stegner's reality. The culture I have known imagines a different continuity and intimacy with the universe, which in large part still exists. It exists in communities all over the region, in language and myth, and in the memories of the people who know who they are and where they come from. Unless someone comes forward to say that Western history did not stop in 1890, Indians will forever be exempted from Descartes's admonition concerning humanity: 'I think, therefore, I am.' Worse yet, fraudulent public policy toward Indians has been and is even now imposed through the conversionary use of imagined realities. (30)

In the same collection of essays, she also offers a compelling discussion of pantribal nationalism as manifested in Silko's novel.

[5]See Elaine Jahner's article, "An Act of Attention: Event Structure in *Ceremony*." She writes that "perhaps one way of describing the magnetic field of

attention is to say that the lodestone in this field is the experience of event rather than sequentially motivated action as the determinant of plot coherence" (37). Her descriptions of the process of event in *Ceremony* are applicable to *Almanac of the Dead*, with its emphases on story and the directions from which it comes and the ways in which one must be attentive. Sterling, for example, with his collections of crime magazines (another way of being attentive) recalls Betonie's collections of phonebooks and other objects in his hogan—Betonie's "keeping track of things." In *Almanac of the Dead*, keeping track of things is joined to attentiveness to the nature of the days.

[6]Gordon Brotherston's *Book of the Fourth World: Reading the Native Americas through their Literature* provides a comparative and comprehensive treatment of this hemisphere's Native literatures. His aim is to "attend to that native coherence ceaselessly splintered by Western politics and philosophy" (xi). He addresses the complicated issues of "script and how to define it, modes of embodying and mapping space, calendars as the reckoning of tribute in kind or labor … , and the links between food production and the shape of cosmogony" (xi).

Some seeds of Brotherston's work lie in Jacques Derrida's critique of Western logocentrism in *Of Grammatology* where he discusses Mayan glyphs (90-93). An excellent anthology that takes up the questions of ruling definitions of writing and books is *Writing Without Words: Alternative Literacies in Mesoamerica and the Andes*. Walter Mignolo, in particular, traces out the Spanish assumptions regarding Mayan and Aztec codices and the problems of colonial terminology.

Finally, see also Michael D. Coe's *Breaking the Maya Code*. His work contextualizes the assumptions governing the relationships between language and writing systems.

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CALLS

SAIL Special Issue

We intend to publish a special issue of ***S.A.I.L.*** that will focus on Native American literary works for young people. Lisa Mitten has agreed to guest edit the issue. Over the last few years, the number of books published has increased dramatically, with well known literary artists producing texts for a younger audience, so it is time to turn our attention to this area of publication again. We invite critical studies, as well as reviews and review essays that examine recent works of literature. Moreover, we have received several recently published books and are seeking reviewers for them. So, if any of our readers are interested in contributing an essay, please contact Lisa Mitten at:

Lisa Mitten
Social Sciences Bibliographer
207 Hillman Library
University of Pittsburgh
Pittsburgh, PA 15260.
LMITTEN@VMS.CIS.PITT.EDU

Or, if interested in submitting an essay and/or reviewing a book or books, please contact me: John Purdy, Editor.

ASAIL at ALA:

American Literature Association Annual Meeting, May 28-30, 1999, Baltimore MD

The Association for the Study of American Indian Literatures invites proposals for its three sessions at the 1999 American Literature Association conference. Descriptions of the three session topics are given below.

Please send 250-word proposals by **January 11, 1999** to:

Eric Gary Anderson
Department of English
Oklahoma State University
205 Morrill Hall
Stillwater, OK 74078-4069
FAX: (405) 744-6326
ERICAG@OSUUNX.UCC.OKSTATE.EDU

Panel 1: A General (Open Topic) Session

Panel 2: Native American Literary Criticism and Theory at the Turn into the 21st Century

This panel invites participants to consider the following questions: Where are we now? Where might we be headed? What is needed? Proposals might address current critical-theoretical debates in the field, intervene in these debates, and/or propose new approaches, concerns, theories, connections, research areas and projects, etc.

Panel 3: The Safe Space of Community: Speaking the Experiences of Northeast/Southeast Native America

This panel focuses upon the importance of the spoken word to Native cultures in the eastern United States and Canada. The culturally distinct styles of eastern Natives tend to be dismissed by western academics, resulting in great pressure upon Native thinkers to abandon their cultural styles if they are to be taken seriously in academia. Worse, the directness of eastern Native speech is chided as “rude” and/or “crude” by cultural gatekeepers who see straightforwardness as aggression, not the natural

consequence of living in intellectual safety within the personal and psychic space of a community that respects every spirit.

This panel will be dedicated to exploring and appreciating the culturally distinct styles of Native speakers and writers from the north-eastern and southeastern U.S. and eastern Canada—not as "quaint" and "colorful" but on their own terms as legitimate discourse styles that, in many instances, are far older than their European counterparts, and which have guided their respective communities through the fraught space of the present. We urge speakers to come forward knowing that they are approaching the safe space of community. Spoken presentations will be preferred over paper readings, although proposals should be in written form.

Any proposal that does not seem appropriate for Panels 2 or 3 may be offered for Panel 1, an "open topic" or "general" session.

Southeastern Anthology

Announcing the compilation of an anthology of writings by and about Southeastern Indian people (and by white and black Southerners with significant Indian ancestry) of the post-Removal era. Primarily, the book will focus on the theme of "those who stayed." Consequently, Oklahoma (i.e., removed) tribal people are outside the purview of the anthology. Poems, short stories, parts of novels, family histories and reminiscences, family photographs, etc. related to Southeastern Indian life, history, and culture will be welcomed for consideration. Emphasis should be on modern-day (i.e. post-removal era) Southeastern nations: Powhatan Confederacy, Coharie, Catawba, Cherokee, Tuscarora, Lumbee, Yuchi, Creek (or Muscogee), Seminole, Miccosuki, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Houma, Chitimacha, Tunica-Biloxi, Quapaw, and Nansemond, and possibly others.

Simon Ortiz's classic line, "Indians are everywhere" in the poem "Travels in the South," is testament to the thousands of Indian people still in the American South, and it is hoped that "The People Who Stayed Behind" (tentative title of the anthology) will reflect this affirmation.

Editors are Geary Hobson, Janet McAdams, and Meredith James. Manuscripts may be submitted to any of the three editors (who share the

same work address) in hardcopy or on disk (3 1/2 Worperfect 6.0 or Microsoft Word) and will be considered returnable if adequate SASE is enclosed. Please do not submit by email or FAX.

Geary Hobson or Janet McAdams or Meredith James
English Department, University of Oklahoma
760 Van Vleet Oval, Rm. 113
Norman OK 73019-0240
email (queries only!): GEARY.HOBSON-1@OU.EDU;
JMCADAMS@OU.EDU; MEREDITH.K.JAMES@OU.EDU

Deadline: December 1, 1998.

REVIEWS

Arriving Amid A Herd of Horses

Blue Horses Rush In. ***Luci Tapahonso. Sun Tracks 34. Tucson: U of Arizona P, 1997. $22.95 cloth, ISBN 0-8165-1728-2; $12.95 paper, ISBN 0-8165-1728-2. 107 pages.***

In 1923, Jean Toomer published a book entitled *Cane* that dramatically altered the way in which writers and readers approached notions of genre and ethnicity. Toomer's thin volume of prose and poetry boldly challenged the modernist allegiance to either poetry or fiction. In Toomer's work, short, lyrical poems buffeted harsh, penetrating short stories, sometimes implicitly commenting on the texts preceding or following them. But *Cane* transgressed more than the limits of genre; it also proved an innovative attempt toward creating a sense of place–the backwoods of Georgia–and the cultural realities inhabiting the landscape. Toomer's poems and stories spoke to political, social, literary, historical, racial, and linguistic preconceptions simultaneously, and his success marked the beginning of the end of Modernism's volatile marriage to autotelism. In stories like "Blood Burning Moon," he explores the dark connections between sexism, racism, and violence, and in the poem "Georgia Dusk," Toomer demonstrates how, over time, a geographic place becomes indistinguishable from the acts committed on its soil. Thus, Toomer proved that both poems and stories can carry social and cultural significance with equal force and that one writer can work deftly within each.

However, American writers tended to stick to either poetry or fiction —especially in the same book—until 1981, when Leslie Marmon Silko published her seminal text, *Storyteller*. In this collection of poems, stories, photographs, essays, myths, and autobiographical narratives, Silko takes Toomer's project several steps further. Like Toomer, Silko conspicuously anchors her work to a particular place (Laguna), but the intertextual trajectory of the book dramatically blurs the lines between poetry and prose, between the written and the oral and between "myth" and "fact" more than Toomer could imagine. For instance, she retells the "Yellow Woman" tale three different times in three different formats from three different points of view, a gesture that not only dramatizes the importance of stories to an individual and a culture but also conveys the authority the author/storyteller possesses to change and personalize communal discourse. Silko's collage of texts subtly confirms what Toomer proposed 60 years earlier, that the personal is the political.

Enter Luci Tapahonso. Her previous book, *Sáanii Dahataal, The Women Are Singing*, a compilation of poems and prose sketches that vividly explore an individual within a the contexts of a supportive and inspirational Navajo family and community, was a major literary achievement. Her cycle of poems and stories weaves the past into the present, the living into the dead, and the earth into memory. In her review of *Sáanii Dahataa* , Linda Hogan rightly notes that Tapahonso's "words are not only about time, the past, and story, but they become a place where all things come together, in a center that is the land of tribe, family, the true center of holy space." If Hogan appears perceptive here, her observations feel downright eerie when applied to Tapahonso's most recent compilation of texts, *Blue Horses Rush In*. Like Toomer and Silko, Tapahonso constructs a collage of texts that not only speak to each other but literally seem to call each other into a shared space of resonance and meaning. Without question, this is Tapahonso's most ambitious and most moving collection of her career, and it is a book that should finally catapult her literary reputation into the realm of that of Erdrich, Silko, Momaday, and Alexie.

To my knowledge, only Silko's *Storyteller* matches the multi-genred design and intertextuality of *Blue Horses Rush In*. Though the book's major components remain poetry and fiction, Tapahonso punctuates these texts with various non-fiction essays, including four pieces that document the excavation of an ancient Hohokami settlement and an autobiographical essay on language and storytelling. Furthermore, the mosaic structure of the collection underscores both Tapahonso's techniques and her thematics. Technically, Tapahonso deftly threads language through a

myriad of genres, forcing the genre to acclimate to her words, instead of the other way around. At times, poetry sounds like prose, prose like poetry, fiction like autobiography, and anthropology like a dream. So seamless is her shift from lyric poet to minimalist fiction writer, one begins to wonder what lure genre holds for Tapahonso. It would appear, though, that her ability to inhabit both poetry and prose (a dwelling unthinkable for a writer like Emily Dickinson, who was fastened to a single genre) is linked to larger thematic concerns. In fact, I would suggest that Tapahonso's desire to speak through both poetry and prose is inexorably stitched to her desire to speak to both the public and the private spheres of human lives.

The very format of the book itself embodies the cyclical relationality of public and private gestures in that both the first and last poems of the collection celebrate birth. "Shisói," the opening poem, ushers the reader into a realm of utter joy as Tapahonso's granddaughter is ushered into the world:

> Her name is She-Who-Brings Happiness because upon being carried,
> she instinctively settles into the warmth
> of your shoulder and neck.
> She nestles, like a little bird, into the contours of your body.
> All you can say is, "She's so sweet, I don't know what to do."
> And we smile, beaming with pleasure. (3)

The refrain, "She's so sweet, I don't know what to do" is repeated, like a mantra, throughout the poem, so that not only is the tender but powerful sentiment of "gahma" solidified, but the necessity of verbalizing that sentiment is as well. The irony of the poem is that the speaker does know what to do: speak. She knows that the act of verbalizing her emotions connects her to both a private group of family members, and through the writing of the poem, she connects with a larger community of readers who have not only felt the same sense of love but also the ineffability that accompanies it. Thus, with this inaugural poem, Tapahonso serves the same function as her granddaughter—she brings us happiness as she ushers the reader into the world of her book.

Since the beginning of the book deals with birth, one might assume the final poem explores notions of death, but this is not the case. "Blue Horses Rush In" is not only the last poem but the title poem, and the birth it venerates is the poet's granddaughter, Chamisa. Tapahonso illustrates the metaphorical power of breath and wind, once again linking the intimate moment of birth with the mutable expanse of nature and the outside world:

> Chamisa slips out, glistening wet and takes her first breath.
> The wind outside swirls small leaves
> and branches in the dark.
> . . .
> This baby arrived amid a herd of horses,
> horses of different colors.
>
> White horses ride in on the breath of the wind.
> White horses from the east
> where plants of golden chamisa shimmer in the moonlight.
> (103)

Adroitly manipulating the lyrical process of conflating external and internal landscapes, Tapahonso infuses the magic of the child's first breath with the power, energy, and motion of wind and thundering horses, an image that recalls the invocation of wind by William Wordsworth in the beginning of *The Prelude*. However, where wind stands as a static symbol for Wordsworth, in Tapahonso's poems, wind becomes an animating force and a medium of exchange with life and death. Chamisa's arrival, amidst a herd of horses, reinforces the energy and mysticism of birth and also the force with which we all gallop blindly into the future:

> Chamisa, Chamisa Bah. It is all this that you are.
> You will grow: laughing, crying,
> and we will celebrate each change you live. (104)

Celebrating the changes of life is, without question, one of the two most prevalent themes of *Blue Horses Rush In*, most notably within the prose pieces. Almost every story revolves around an individual who must deal with a life-altering event. Where the poems reverberate with a notably personal tenor, Tapahonso's fiction feels more distanced. This is not to say that the fiction lacks the emotional energy of the poetry; on the contrary, it is the stories, not the poems, that confront the book's truly difficult issues. However, the speakers of the stories and the characters in the stories are somewhat detached from the events within the stories themselves, mostly by time but also by language. More clinical, more narrative, their vocabulary and diction eschew the drama of the lyric voice, and instead acquire the composed perspective of someone speaking to a friend she hasn't seen in years. The characters in Tapahonso's stories have problems, and they need to work through them.

For instance, in "She Was Singing in the Early Morning," the narrator's friend rediscovers, through singing, the possibility of joy in her new life away from her abusive husband. Similarly, the narrator and main character in "No Denials from Him," who is adjusting to life after her

divorce from a philandering husband, also finds curative powers in singing. The radio, which fills her solitary evenings, acts as a vehicle connecting her to shared experience: "For some reason, all those songs about people being lonely, people being left, people yearning for someone absent, all those songs healed me. Why would songs like that exist if these things had never happened?" (56). During moments like this, the reader feels like she is eavesdropping on a private conversation or perhaps listening to a radio call-in show. To what degree these stories move back and forth between the public and the private remains intriguingly indeterminate. Even in a story like "All the Colors of Sunset"–the most wrenching story in the collection–in which a grandmother comes to terms with the death of her granddaughter, the support of her family and friends, and the ritual of healing performed by a medicine man ultimately work as regenerative forces and allow her to look, with hope, to the future. However, the poem also enables her to recoup a sense of the past, and she is able to reunite with the culture who generated the healing ceremony out of the marriage of spirit and earth.

If Tapahonso's prose takes as its point of departure the celebration or approbation of change, then her poems turn on the absence of change, or more accurately on various elements of Navajo ritual. On one hand, Tapahonso invokes and poeticizes Navajo prayers and spirituality, and on the other hand, she invokes and poeticizes the mundane rituals of everyday life, like cooking, cleaning, travelling, talking, and listening. By combining the scared and the secular, Tapahonso paints one of the most comprehensive and nuanced portraits of Navajo life. In the poem "Hills Brothers Coffee" (which is served up in the middle of an essay), the poet and her uncle enjoy the dual ritual pleasures of morning coffee and storytelling, while in "This Is How They Were Placed for Us," Tapahonso, in hypnotizing, incantatory language, evokes the spiritual and historical powers of the holy mountains:

> The San Francisco Peaks taught us to believe in strong families.
> Dook'o'ooslíí binahji' danihidziil.
> The San Francisco Peaks taught us to value our many relatives.
> E'e'aahjígo Dook'o'ooslíí^d bik'ehgo hózhóní^go naashá. (41)

By offering her poem as a gift to both the spirits of the San Franciso Peaks and her readers, Tapahonso reveals the source from which her poems and their magic derive:

> All these were given to us to live by.
> These mountains and the land keep us strong.
> From them, and because of them, we prosper.

With this we speak,
with this we think,
with this we sing,
with this we pray.

This is where our prayers began. (42)

Because Tapahonso's voice rings with authenticity and purpose, we find ourselves utterly drawn into both of her ritualized worlds, feeling unusually connected to each, and we realize we have learned, as the poet has learned, what it means to become part of something larger than ourselves.

Another woman who loved the landscape Tapahonso writes about was Georgia O'Keeffe. Perhaps O'Keeffe's most intriguing quality was her innovative conflation of representation and abstraction. A meandering blue line that slices across the canvas might be a river carving a space through the mountains or music undulating in the air, or simply a blue line slicing across a canvas. Of course, with O'Keeffe it is all three and more. Nevertheless, the ability to communicate on symbolic and expressionistic levels gives her work a clarity and depth that seems utterly visionary.

Tapahonso's written texts work on similar planes. I have argued elsewhere that Tapahonso, perhaps more than any other American poet, coalesces critical elements of the lyric and epic forms, and the levels of diction and genres Tapahonso manipulates in this book merely accentuates this fact. For instance, in one of the most compelling texts in the book, "Daané' Diné," Tapahono moves from a description of a Hohokamki excavation site to a description of a dream of her childhood that she has upon returning to her hotel. What makes this poem unusual is the form it takes. The first half of the poem, a survey of the site, is in verse, while the very lyrical revelation of the dream, is in prose. Think about this: the analytical, narrative of the site is rendered through poetry, but the more poetic dream sequence finds expression in prose. Additionally, Tapahonso plays with present and past tense, so that in the dream, the Hohokamki excavation, the dream of childhood, and the present reality merge into one time and place, just as the forms of poetry and prose merge into one timeless articulation. By altering expectations and characteristics of poetry and prose, Tapahonso navigates like a seasoned sailor through the always merging waters of lyric and epic and shows us how public and private experiences inevitably flow into each other. Like Toomer, Tapahonso also elicits an utterly original perception of how a geographical space becomes part and parcel of the language spoken within it and the people who live on it. A poem like "Daané' Diné" begins to appear more and more like an

O'Keefee canvas, blurring the distinctions between landscape and symbolic process.

If the book has a weakness, it lies in its plurality of voices, where, ironically, the book also locates its strength. Because so many distinct voices emanate from the pages, and because she shifts from poetry to fiction to non-fiction prose, a singular poetic voice does not emerge from the book as strongly as one might like. In the poem "It Was," perhaps the best piece in the book, Tapahonso most clearly discovers her most capable lyric voice. But most often, the poetic persona of Luci Tapahonso becomes occluded by the Navajo idioms, the diversity of characters, and the culture of communication and community that people her texts. However, in a culture that values the story over the teller, the text over the author, the message over the messenger, Tapahonso has, indeed, established a place we can all inhabit. Readers of Tapahonso's works will remember that "Blue Horses Rush In" was the first poem in her previous collection of poems, where in this book it is the last. The decision not only to include the poem in this collection but to place it at the end reminds us that experiences, like poems, are never shared just once. We are as much a part of our past as we are part of our land and our language, and with this realization, we understand how Tapahonso has woven us into the saddle of her horses as they gallop backward, wildly, into the future.

Dean Rader

The Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test: New and Collected Elementary, Epistolary, Autobiographical and Oratorical Choctologies. *D. L. Birchfield.*

Greenfield Center NY: The Greenfield Review P, 1998. $14.95 paper, ISBN 0-912678-97-6. 184 pages.

D. L. Birchfield, known to his close friends as Donnie, is one of contemporary America's truly unique characters. With an outward personality that reminds one of a citizen of Mayberry, RFD, underneath it all he's an incredibly hard-boiled academic intellectual. He's what a colleague of mine once years ago referred to as a pseudo-redneck. Proud to be an Okie, he's equally proud of being Choctaw. He's as much at

home on the campus of a major university as he is along the banks of Muddy Boggy Creek in the Choctaw country of southeastern Oklahoma. And Donnie's new book, *The Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test*, is an accurate reflection of that very complex personality.

I've known of this book since before it was created. When Donnie first told me his plan for it, I had read some of the individual selections. I was politic, of course, but inside I was telling myself that the idea was totally insane. It would not be a collection. Rather it would be a mad hodge-podge of unrelated, disconnected, individual items. I had almost forgotten all about it, though, when I later received the complete manuscript in the mail. I read it through and was truly amazed. Not only did it work, it worked brilliantly. And as if to confirm my own judgment, the book deservedly received the North American Native Authors First Book Award for Prose.

Since the book's publication, trying to characterize it, I have told people, perhaps half facetiously, that with *The Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test*, Donnie Birchfield has done for (to?) Native American literature what Laurence Sterne did for British literature with *Tristram Shandy*. It's an absolutely mad collection of everything from short fiction and literary criticism to historical analysis and personal essay. There's even a little poetry thrown in and lots of great healthy doses of satire.

One of the characteristics of Native literature in general, it seems to me, is that often it defies categorization. Consider Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain* and *Names*, and Silko's *Storyteller*. Consider almost anything of Gerald Vizenor's. My own editors at the University of Oklahoma Press, while preparing the manuscript of my collection *The Witch of Goingsnake and Other Stories*, said to me that they had one problem with the book. "The selections in it are not all short stories," they said. I suggested that perhaps they could retitle it *The Witch of Goingsnake and Other Things*, but they declined.

So just what kind of a book is *The Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test*? To what category does it belong? The only one I can think of is that category of Native literature which most troubles non-native readers, editors and literary critics, that peculiarly Native category of Momaday, Silko and Vizenor. It's a category in which the writer creates his own genre with each book he writes. Publishers and book store managers hate it. Probably librarians do too. This Birchfield book is a shining example of that Native literary phenomenon.

From the opening selection, "Elementary Choctology," a pair of quotations from the new governor of French Louisiana in 1753, the first upon his first meeting with the Choctaws and the second made one year

later, this book is what is popularly called these days "a page turner." Donnie's prose is crisp and clean, though it varies in style appropriately with his subject matter to accurately reflect his own personal brand of intellectual schizophrenia.

His satire is wonderful, and like all satire these days, it will fly high, way over the heads of some readers. One interviewer, having read "Mother's Mental Illness," actually praised Donnie in solemn, respectful tones for his courage in writing on so delicate a topic as insanity in the family. It reminded me of some college students I had in a class years ago who were outraged by Jonathan Swift's classic satirical essay, "A Modest Proposal." The best satire always, it seems, eludes dull wits. In his critical essay, "Lonesome Duck: the Blueing of a Texas-American Myth," Donnie skillfully takes on the current darling of both the literati and the Hollywood establishment, Larry McMurtry, something long overdue in literary criticism. And in "Using and Misusing History," he makes an impassioned plea for accuracy in historical writing.

And there are serious, sometimes solemn moments here too. There's a moving and sincere appreciation of "Anna Lewis: Choctaw Historian," and an expression of deep attachment to and love of nature and the sadness and sense of loss at its exploitation by "modern" man expressed in "Roads to Nowhere" and "Sanctuary." There's also a wonderful combination of quiet humor, love, and nostalgia in "Dear Old Fishing Buddie … Dear Granny B."

There is truly something here for all discerning readers, a little something more for anyone with an interest in Native American topics, perhaps even a little more for "Choctologists," although I'm not at all certain that it's necessary to be one of those to love this book. I urge you to pick up and read *The Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test*. I'm convinced that if you do, you'll really come to know Donnie Birchfield, and if you get to know him, you'll love him.

Robert J. Conley

CONTRIBUTORS

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