

## Silko's *the Almanac of the Dead* as Novel of Minority Discourse

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### ABSTRACT:

*Almanac of the Dead, a novel, is a major extension of Silko's important work. It continues her previous concerns with tribal traditions and the histories as well. It constructs meaning carefully from a mix of perspectives. Silko finds connections among, African, Haitian, Mexican, Mayan, Hopi, Lakota, Mafia, Namvet Capitalist, Marxist, drug-culture, sex-business, and other stories. Her Almanac puts contemporary life in the fresh light of larger and older discourses. This novel seems to be set just a bit into our future, but will recognize the aspects of lives around right now. Silko's greatest successes in this book are in bringing forward ignored facts and forces, in telling untold histories.*

### INTRODUCTION:

Basically, this is a book about the age-old battle between good and evil. In the *Almanac*, we get a bigger story. Evil seems to carry a lot more weight here. The struggle here is not cantered on one protagonist. This novel reaches out to gather together half-dozen story-threads with no one at the centre. It's bigger than its nineteenth-century European antecedents. It's bigger than a mini-series. It's more like a myth cycle, but it's as tangled as a soap opera.

Within this novel there is a document referred to as "the ancient almanac", brought north by children of the tribes and now in Lecha's possession. She is working on a translation, organizing the old manuscript, bringing the words of the dead to new life. That almanac is at the heart of this novel, but the claim about prophecy seems to be made for the power of the novel itself, the book that is actually called the *Almanac of the Dead*. The ancient almanac stands, obviously, at the centre of this effort. It is a collection of fragments further fragmented by the ravages of time and necessity, in need of repair. But, even as nearly modelled on the books and legends of the Americas as it is, it is a fiction within this fiction. The power of the *Almanac of the Dead* lies in textualizing many aspects of tribal existence: myths and other histories, poetics and survival business, even the struggle or tribal Americans with all that is opposite to them. It is these oppositional aspects that nearly blow the novel apart.

At present, the ancient almanac reads with the liveliness of poetry and the force of history. It presents the ugliness of destruction, but places it within the pattern of bigger stories. The humour of riddle and the depth of symbol join the beauty of image and the power of rhetoric in the ancient books that Silko follows as model for the almanac. Her *Almanac of the Dead* follows those models as well, towards an optimistic end. It shows us where we might put our hope.

Foregrounding the agitated relations between among spaces and subjects, the map and the novel that follows it understand geography not as the blueprint of presupposed fixed reality, but as the inscription of struggle. The landscape is both a moment and space of tension. The map's spatiotemporal dimension articulates an understanding of landscape as peopled, and in geographer Don Mitchell's words, as "constructed out of the struggles, compromises, and temporarily settled relations of competing and cooperating social actors : it is both a thing... and a social process, at once solidly material and ever changing"(30). For Silko, as a thing and a social process, landscape resembles language, which is also solidly material and ever changing, and it is the relation between the two that Almanac amplifies.

The novel focuses on the story of Native Americans seeking the development of social power and insight, as Silko's map states, "nothing less that the return of all tribal lands". *Almanac* narrative moves relentlessly across time and space to argue "that the Americas have been both physical and a rhetorical battleground for the last five hundred years" (Thorn:213). As Silko's map shows, land is both material and narrative. The novel's stories reveal how the land has been defined differently through the use of various languages and forms of measurement. Depending on which is employed, the land might be understood as the Americas, the United states, nation, state, reservation, desert, pueblo etc.

Leslie Marmon Silko's second novel, *Almanac of the Dead*, attempts to overcome the limitations of the American Indian Movement by presenting readers with the model of "tribal internationalists", individuals who work with international alliances to reclaim their Indigenous land. In *Almanac* Silko suggests that cross-cultural spiritual coalitions made up of "tribal internationalists" would provide a more powerful means of combating the social, political, and economic injustice faced by American Indians (and many oppressed peoples around the world) than secular politics based on ethnicity and race alone. Silko implies that although some positive changes resulted from the American Indian Movement, it failed to bring about the total amelioration of injustice because it mimicked the oversimplifications and divisions of secular identity politics. She states, "I feel it is more effective to write a story... than to rant and rave. I think it is more effective in reaching people. For Silko novels and stories offer a more effective way to enact social change because they are capable of "reaching people" on a profound emotional level and connect them "through time-back to a time before this person was

born”. *Almanac* attempts to succeed where the American Indian Movement failed by overcoming the divisiveness and limitations of secular politics with the expansiveness of coalition politics that connects individuals “through time” and space to each other, living and long dead. Silko sees this connection as one of the “spirit”, connecting living readers to the spirits of dead ancestors and the spirits of the earth and natural world. Silko believes that these cross-national spiritual connections have the power to resist injustice in the Americans more effectively than secular political and national movements.

*Almanac of the Dead* creates these cross-cultural spiritual connections by linking the lives and actions of more than fifty characters living in the geographic area now known as the American Southwest and Mexico. Although the majority of the text is set in the near future, overall it spans more than five hundred years. The novel prophesies a future cross-cultural uprising of oppressed people led by twin male spiritual leaders, Tacho and El Feo, an uprising that is first prophesied nearly five hundred years earlier in fragments of a Mayan almanac contained within the text. Unlike the three known Mayan almanacs named after the European cities in which they are now located- Madrid, Dresden, and Paris-Silko imagines a fourth almanac that is protected for centuries from destruction and obsolescence by American Indians from multiple tribes located on either side of what is now the U.S.-Mexico border. The text traces the translation of the almanac into English by twin American Indian women, Lecha and Zeta, and Lecha’s white secretary, Seese. By the end of the text, Lecha, Zeta, and Seese are connected to a cross-cultural “network of tribal coalitions” made up of various religious and oppositional political leaders dedicated to resisting injustice in North and South America.

The imagining of this fictional fourth almanac in the whole long history and its spiritual narrative connecting indigenous people through time and geographic space reflects Pueblo/Keresan and many American Indian belief and cultural systems’ views regarding the relationship among land, time, and history. These views stand in sharp contrast to normative Christian views. The Christian Bible describes time and history as proceeding from a fixed point in creation and progressing in a linear fashion toward a better, transcendent future where Jesus Christ reigns. Although a few Christian denominations view this transcendent future as taking place on earth the majority view this paradise as removed from the natural earth. In *Almanac*, Silko, suggests that social, economic, and political injustice stems from normative Christian and Euro-American traditions’ disconnected view of the land. The characters the novel portrays least sympathetically are those most removed from the natural earth. Wealthy white characters like Leah Blue fantasize about creating immense waterways. “I the desert, despite the fact that it will irreparably harm the desert and the animals and people who live in it. Leah sees herself as being “in the real estate business to make profits, not to save wildlife or save the desert”. The text also references the wealthy “biosphere tycoons”, like Serlo, who first pollute the earth and then plan to load “the last of earth’s uncontaminated soil, water, and oxygen” onto orbiting space colonies, leaving the rest of the earth’s residents to die in an

uninhabitable wasteland. This disconnected view of land stands in sharp contrast to the nonwhite characters, which are taught to pay close attention to and interact with the land in order to survive. This connection to the land provides spiritual sustenance to the characters, as the earth and its animals are depicted throughout the text as intermediaries and messengers between the Indigenous people and their powerful ancestor spirits. Calabazas, a Yaqui gunrunner in the text, explains to his nephews that paying close attention to the land also carries practical significance as it gives “the desert traveler critical information about traces of water or grass for his animals” and knowledge about various species of plants, insects, and animals. This intimate knowledge of the land is juxtaposed to the white characters’ “blindness to the world”, where “a ‘rock’ was just a ‘rock’ wherever they found it, despite obvious differences in shape, density, color, or the position of the rock relative to all things around it”.

*Almanac* has received severe criticism from mainstream critics for its portrayal of white Europeans and Americans and for Silko’s rejection of “all things European”. Although the text finds fault with dominant Euro-American ways of viewing the world, it encourages all Americans, including those of white European descent, to participate in riding the earth of exploitation. The twin spiritual leaders Tacho and El Feo state :

All were welcome. It was only necessary to walk with the people and let go of all the greed and the selfishness is 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.

Dominant European culture is being criticized here for condoning individual “greed” and “selfishness” and for its dissociation of people from any responsibility to the earth. This passage suggests that giving up “blasting, digging, or burning” and other exploitative behaviors that harm to the earth and its people will allow one to experience “peace and harmony with all living things”. The insistence that “all were welcome” suggests that Silko is critiquing a specific worldview derived from Europe, as opposed to targeting the white race as a whole.

Silko’s insistence in this passage and throughout *Almanac* that “all things European” must be “let go”, however, expresses an uncharacteristically simplistic perspective that contradicts the many places in the novel where Silko demonstrates just how intermingled the worlds of the colonizer and the colonized have become in the late twentieth century in terms of race, language, ideology, and technology. It would seem impossible to “let go” of all things” appropriated from European culture in the Americas. The phrase “all things European” could be read as a condemnation of the dominant Euro-American disconnection among people, land, and history that leads to dividing and exploiting the

earth and its people for individual profit and gain. With this understanding of “all things European”, Silko can be seen as advocating a change in people’s perspective and behavior to the land and each other rather than a complete eschewal of all knowledge and people associated with European culture. Even when the phrase “all things European” is read from this perspective, however, Silko still does not fully represent how difficult, and perhaps impossible, completely “letting go” of mainstream perspectives of the world might be.

The contradictions the phrase “all things European” attempts to contain reflect a major tension in the novel between ancient American Indian prophecy and Silko’s contemporary revolutionary tendencies. Silko employs the phrase to establish a direct continuity with ancient American Indian prophecies that used it to predict the gradual disappearance of European culture and customs. This explicit repetition of language is crucial to Silko’s politics since she has adamantly declared that her work is “not reinterpretation” of ancient prophecies but, in fact, “remains the same because of the oral tradition”. In keeping with the ancient prophecies, *Almanac* states that this process of social change will take place over long periods of time. The text also tries to accelerate this process, however, to encourage individuals to change their perspectives quickly once they have had certain dreams, listened to particular spiritual leaders, or perhaps read the novel itself. The text’s conception of change as taking place immediately, rather than through the gradual process described by the ancient prophecies, reflects an unacknowledged tendency on Silko’s part, despite her protests, to reinterpret ancient prophecy for its contemporary benefit. In contrast to traditional Christian prophecy, this merely announces the inevitable end of history. Silko’s text seems to contain a more dynamic kind of prophecy that spurs on the changes it predicts.

The Euro-American belief that humans and human history are disconnected from the land stands in sharp contrast to Keresan, and a majority of other American Indian, views that perceive human time and history as being inextricable from the land. Calabazad states :

We don’t believe in boundaries. Borders. Nothing like that. We are here thousands of years before the first whites. We are here before maps or quit claims. We know where we belong on this earth. We have always moved freely. North-south, East-west. We pay no attention to what isn’t real. Imaginary lines. Imaginary minutes and hours. Written law. We recognize none of that.

One of the primary characteristics in this statement in Calabazas’s use of the ever – present tense. When Silko has him state “We are here thousands of years” instead of “were here”, she is grammatically connecting him to American Indian ancestors who have lived and migrated throughout the Americas for thousands of years. In an interview

with Ray Gonzalez, Silko argues that society evolves from age to age this conception of time is consistent with how “a lot of tribal people see and measure time-past, present, and future at once. Where I grew up, everything was always in the present”. This view of time stands in sharp contrast to the linear distinction between past, present, and future time privileged by the dominant Euro-American culture’s reliance on the normative Christian worldview. The Keresan view of the connection between land, history, and time forms a sharp contrast to the “borders” privileged by the dominant American culture. As Calabazas states, these “borders” draw “imaginary lines” between the past and the present, the north and the south, the east and the west, communal use of the land and individual ownership declared on “maps or quit claims”. These imaginary “borders” not only make distinctions between these terms; they also tend to privilege one term over another-the present over the past, the affluent north controlled by the United States over the poorer south of Mexico, written law over oral tradition.

This arbitrary privilege works to divide American Indians from each other and creates false distinctions that were not there before colonialism. In a 1993 interview with Laura Coltelli, Silko states that “in the days before monarch’s maps with boundary lines, the tribal people of the Americas thought of the whole earth as their home” and traveled freely until the boundary between Mexico and the United States “sought to destroy ancient liaisons between peoples on opposite sides of the newly created borderline”. In *Almanac of the Dead* Silko points to the arbitrary nature of borders and the similar beliefs and oppression experienced by “tribal peoples” in an attempt to re-create these “ancient liaisons” in the hopes that contemporary manifestations of these alliances can be used to resist social injustice. These people are connected not through their national affiliation or location on either side of the border but through their relationships to the land and the spirits of the land. To reinforce this idea the text is built around a spiritual structure that connects past, present, and future peoples through shared powers and channels of communication that have been discredited by the dominant American culture. Many of the text’s more than fifty characters are depicted as having the same dreams and hearing the same prophecies from widely different sources. Within the structure of the text some characters have the legitimate ability to read minds, predict the future, and communicate with animals and spirits. Throughout the novel multiple characters that have never physically met are connected to each other through this larger spiritual structure.

*Almanac* also appropriates the more material instruments colonialism typically used to create artificial borders to reconnect people to each other. The text begins when Silko disrupts the colonizing ideology of traditional cartography that views land as merely space to rule, delineate, and build over. Instead of envisioning land relationships between people as represented and parceled out by maps, Silko rethinks how a more in elusive relationship between people and land might be represented. In the novel she includes a map of her own design that depicts the national border between the United States and

Mexico. Silko disrupts the rigid separation of these two countries, however, by also depicting dotted lines representing the flow of people, money, weapons, and other resources over this border in both directions. She further disrupts the ability of maps to represent precise geographic locations by depicting Cherry Hill, New Jersey, close to Albuquerque, and Haiti and Cuba just south of El Paso. This depiction of land seems to expose the lack of connection between land and its representation in cartography.

The most radical aspect of Silko's map is that it includes five hundred years of human history and spiritual beliefs in its representations of land. A legend entitled "The Indian Connection" declares, "The Indian Wars have never ended in the Americas. Native Americans acknowledge no borders: they seek nothing less than the return of all tribal lands". Through the larger spiritual structure and revision of colonists' maps, Silko connects the desires, actions, and social beliefs of American Indians five hundred years ago to those living today. She argues that American Indians continue to believe many of the same prophecies, fight the same resistance war, and "seek nothing less than the return of all tribal lands. "Silko's map disrupts traditional cartography that would work to divide the land and people based on political borders. Instead, she uses the border making of traditional maps against it, exposing just how artificial the distinctions are between people, time, belief systems, and land.

Rather than dividing peoples and land, Silko's map connects disparate peoples over a five-hundred-year period. On the map nineteenth-century Apache "Geronimo" appears on a list of characters directly before the African American Vietnam War veteran "Clinton" and directly after white "John Dillinger", who was killed after committing a bank robbery in 1934. By linking these disparate people and time periods together on her map and throughout the text, Silko works to disrupt the normative Christian idea, repeated in secular terms in the Enlightenment, that human time and history are linear and disconnected from the earth. In *Yellow Woman*, Silko states that ancient American Indians viewed time "not[as] a series of ticks of a clock, one following another" but instead "round-like a tortilla", where "[t]here are no future or past times; there are always all the times, which differ slightly as the locations on the tortilla differ slightly". Instead of a linear movement toward a transcendent future, time, and history are viewed as circular and continually returning. Because every time exists simultaneously and will repeat itself, people are urged throughout *Almanac* to remember past times and histories in order to avoid repeating the same mistakes and injustices. Rather than seeing themselves as just one inferior step in a progression toward a more superior future removed from the earth, readers are encouraged to take responsibility for their present actions as they are continuously related to the history and future of the earth and its peoples.

Silko's map is just one way that the text critiques official history for its attempts to erase Indigenous people entirely from the land and history of the Southwest. *Almanac* also includes alternative versions of history and social attitude that attempt to remember and value the lives, experiences, and beliefs of Indigenous peoples. Angelita, a Mayan woman warrior who follows Tacho and El Feo, offers an oral history of four hundred years of injustice, torture, and armed and spiritual resistance experienced by various American Indian tribes and African slaves transported to the Americas. Clinton, as African American Vietnam veteran, also produces an unofficial history in a series of notes, notebooks and two radio broadcasts. Both of these versions of unofficial history, social system are cross-cultural, connecting American Indians, black Indians, Africans, and African Americans. These unofficial histories combine ancient American Indian and African ways of marking time-expressed in phrases like "From the beginning", "In the old days", "since the Europeans had arrived", and "since time immemorial" and by giving different time periods specific names and personalities – with the contemporary dominant American way of marking time through chronological dates based on the supposed birth of Jesus Christ(B.C. and A.D.). *Almanac* attempts to allow these multiple times to exist simultaneously in the text expresses a belief that history is extricable from these varying theories of time and land.

Acknowledging the interconnection between history, time, and land is a powerful part of Silko's vision for social change. The power of this connection is repeated throughout the novel by various characters; however, Clinton states it most succinctly when he declares, "The powers who controlled the United States didn't want the people to know their history. If the people knew their history, they would realize they must rise up". The "history" that Clinton, Angelita, and other characters in the novel supply is one of the stolen land unequal distributions of resources, slavery, torture, and genocide. Clinton suggests that full knowledge of these stories of injustice will entice people to revolt against the "powers who controlled the United States" and their version of history. Including these stories of injustice in her novel suggests that Silko believes stories, even in the written form, have the power to effect material social change.

## CONCLUSION:

For Silko literature connects readers through time, space, and cultures, allowing them to see beyond the present view of the world, to reimagining the relationship of the past to the future. *Almanac* allows its readers to imagine a different, more life-sustaining reality and advocates that they work to create it. Readers are encouraged to make choices in the future that benefit the earth and its inhabitants rather than identify with and repeat the destructive behaviours of those in power. Although unacknowledged by Silko because it would contradict her attempts to establish a direct continuity with ancient American Indian prophecy, the novel attempts to bring about the change in consciousness it discusses by fostering cross-cultural resistance networks dedicated to social justice. By

reconciling ancient prophecy with issues crucial to contemporary American Indian politics, Silko attempts to inspire her readers to resist injustice and secure sovereignty for American Indian peoples and nations through cross-cultural coalitions of Indigenous peoples dedicated to reclaiming their land. In the very last little chapter, a character named Sterling returns to the Laguna pueblo land where Silko herself was also born.

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