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Weaving a Transnational Narrative: Yellow Woman and Orature in *Almanac of the Dead*

Shannon Toll

> The people are hungry. The people are cold. The rich have stolen the land. The rich have stolen freedom. The people demand justice. Otherwise, Revolution.
>
> —Leslie Marmon Silko, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*

> I am hungry. My people are hungry. So many people are hungry and homeless. Your new laws will only lead to more of this misery. Can we talk about it like human beings?
>
> —Naomi Klein, "Awake, Hungry, and Idle No More"

On December 11, 2012, Attawapiskat First Nation Chief Theresa Spence announced that she would be undertaking a hunger strike in response to the sweeping and cataclysmic changes found in Bill C-45, legislation that flew in the face of the treaty relationships established between the Canadian government and First Nations people. Refusing to break her strike until a nation-to-nation discussion could be held, Chief Spence's actions were an act of solidarity with the Idle No More movement, a grassroots campaign organized by four indigenous and non-indigenous women in Canada. What began as a series of teach-ins to call attention to pressing issues facing First Nations people spiraled into a global phenomenon, a transnational call for the preservation of the earth and recognition of indigenous rights. Chief Spence's six-week-long fast ended with a thirteen-point "Declaration of Commitment" calling

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for "nation-to-nation" dialogue between First Nation groups and the Canadian government. Under a banner of decolonization and environmental preservation, Idle No More has continued to spread globally and, assisted by online media, unite groups that were formerly geographically and culturally disparate.[1]

The scope of this grassroots, transnational, and trans-indigenous phenomenon is reminiscent of the expansive, multinational coalition of indigenous and non-indigenous activists found in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*, particularly in that women play an integral role in its development. Indeed, powerful women populate Silko's writing in every genre, reflecting the Laguna-Pueblo tradition of associating femininity with creation and continuance. In *Storyteller*, Silko recounts the inheritance of oral tradition that she received from the women in her family who "passed down an entire culture / by word of mouth / an entire vision of the world."[2] This inheritance of orature fundamentally shapes Silko's work, and these lines reflect her understanding of the power of oral tradition to shape material reality and its potential to influence the future of communities. In *Almanac of the Dead*, Silko herself takes on the role of creatrix, creating her own "vision of the world" that manifests in the almanac around which the events of the novel are constructed.

This almanac, which Jace Weaver describes as a set of Mayan codices that is both "a symbol of and a tool of Native survivance," not only contains the history of indigenous peoples in the Americas, but also portends events to come in the region.[3] These events are put into motion by a sprawling cast of characters who intersect racial, geographical, and cultural boundaries; specifically, they are instigated by women who seem to exist on the periphery, and who possess an (at times) ambivalent power that enables them to influence their respective societies. In Silko's texts, these are Yellow Women, powerful, liminal characters known for their unorthodox and often scandalous actions, such as adultery, familial abandonment, and even witchcraft. Yellow Women play an integral role in many of Silko's short works and novels. As figures of Laguna-Pueblo orature, their power to incite change within a community can be either creative or destructive.[4] In *Almanac*, Silko's Yellow Women illustrate this power by working either in concert with the "Destroyers" or against them. These Destroyers are progenitors and inheritors of continued conquest in the Americas, drawing their power from exploitative capitalism and violence.

In her polarizing anticolonial novel *Almanac*, Silko emphasizes the importance of cultural recollection and cross-cultural action to facilitate decolonization and explores these themes through manifestations of Yellow Woman. Focusing on Yellow Woman's ability to transcend limitations and transgress social norms, this article seeks to identify the role of Laguna-Pueblo orature and its Yellow Woman stories in *Almanac*. Yellow Woman embodies change and fluidity; the Yellow Woman stories Silko retells in the novel reveal that these attributes are, in fact, necessary to cultural preservation. Adapted into a new context, Silko's Yellow Women also embody the importance of locally specific histories within larger movements toward decolonization. I additionally draw from Silko's *Storyteller* Yellow Woman tales to further argue that *Almanac*'s Yellow Women demonstrate not only the creative or destructive power of femininity, but also the importance of cross-cultural, Native-driven decolonization efforts.

While previous critical works have discussed the recurrence and significance of the Yellow Women in Silko's texts, their focus has usually revolved around a specific, isolated relationship between a male protagonist and a Yellow Woman, such as Tse'h from *Ceremony* or Angelita from *Almanac*. Seeking to remove Yellow Woman from her relative isolation, this article discusses how Silko's Yellow Women in *Almanac* are agents of change within *interconnected* communities and play an integral role in the trans-indigenous politics that guide the novel. This article identifies the three Yellow Women in the text—Angelita la Escapía, Alegria Martinez-Soto, and Seese—as the "Great Dark Angel," the "Destroyer," and the "Ally," respectively. Although they never interact directly, together their words and deeds mount a critique against the potential of Euro-American political modes, specifically Marxism, to effectively facilitate decolonization. Finally, while *Almanac* paints a picture of the Americas that in the future is free of "all things European," Angelita and Seese exemplify the value of cross-cultural participation in this vision, demonstrating that while change should be rooted within communities and reflect their epistemic contexts, these localized revolutionary acts have the potential to improve conditions on a more global scale.

The "Great Dark Angel"

The Kino-nda-niimi Collective, the authors of *The Winter We Danced*, explain that Idle No More can be understood as "a culmination of the historical and contemporary legacies emerging from colonization and violence throughout North America and the world," leading to an invigorated, multinational effort toward rectifying the wrongs wrought by these histories of oppression.[5] Much like Idle No More, in *Almanac* communities of indigenous peoples are connecting with one another and mobilizing under the shared experience of colonization; however, as I will show, the novel provides a definitively more radical approach, both in its goals and its means of achieving these goals. In *Almanac*, Mexico is the nexus of this revolutionary vision, as Native people gather there and begin amassing an arsenal in preparation to forcibly reclaim the land. They are led by charismatic leaders: the mystical twins Tacho and El Feo, and Angelita la Escapía, known in her circle as "the Meat Hook" and the "Great Dark Angel."

A star student at a Marxist school run by Cubans in Mexico City, Angelita rose to the position of colonel within the Army of Justice and Redistribution (also referred to as the People's Army). Many believe her to be dangerous and unpredictable. Angelita displays stereotypically masculine attributes, such as her military rank, her oratorical presence, and her polyamorous relationships. These traits alienate her from other people within her community, who are befuddled and intimidated by her. Angelita acknowledges that "there is gossip, talking and speculation about me," but rather than feeling the need to qualify her decisions, she states that "I have nothing to say except every breath, my every heartbeat, is for the return of the land."[6] She is dedicated to the people who share her ultimate goal, even if they attempt to shame her as a promiscuous nonconformist. Paula Gunn Allen explains that Yellow Woman stories "suggest that the behavior of women, at least at certain times or under certain circumstances, must be improper or nonconformist for the greater good of the whole"; thus, Angelita's

deviant status allows her to occupy a powerful, transformative position within the army, as she is unhindered by the norms of accepted social behavior.[7]

Angelita shares this lack of adherence to social norms with the Yellow Women in Silko's *Storyteller*, women who break with convention by abandoning their families to engage in relationships with katcina spirits, or even frolic with witches at night. In one such story, titled "Yellow Woman," a contemporary Pueblo woman engages in an affair with a mysterious cattle thief named Silva whom she meets at the river. She accompanies him back to his home in the mountains, only to escape later when they are confronted by an irate rancher.[8] In another tale from *Storyteller,* "Cottonwood Part Two: Buffalo Story," Yellow Woman runs off with Buffalo Man and lives among the buffalo. The saga ends with the Buffalo people sacrificing their bodies to feed the starving Laguna people.[9] As these storylines demonstrate, Yellow Woman's sexuality is a driving force and her trysts often facilitate important and beneficial change in her community. Just as Yellow Woman's choice of Buffalo Man as a lover results in delivering her community from starvation, Angelita shares her bed with men whose knowledge and connections are beneficial to the revolution. Embracing subversion rather than conformity, the Yellow Women from *Storyteller* and Angelita from *Almanac* are nexuses of change.

Angelita is brazen and unapologetic when it comes to her sexuality, and her lover El Feo recognizes her as the "great dark angel from the thirteen nights of the old gods . . . the angel [he] had been searching for all his life."[10] El Feo is drawn to Angelita's "earth-centeredness" and feels that their trysts are more than just physical intercourse. As they make love, the act reveals a vision of a more balanced world: "he imagined he was burying himself deeper and deeper into the core of the earth until he lost himself in eternity where wide rivers ran to a gentle ocean that included all beings, even Engels and Marx."[11] El Feo conflates his and Angelita's physical sexuality with his spiritual visions of the earth they serve as well as the ideologues they respect (according to Angelita, Engels and Marx borrowed their concepts from the Indians). It is clear in this passage that El Feo and Angelita's relationship transcends their personal connection and has greater implications—specifically, its potential to incite change. The transformative power of the sexual union between a Yellow Woman and a katcina spirit is central to the Yellow Woman tales. These relationships, rather than focusing purely on physical pleasure, are part of a larger story taking place.

Indeed, as Silko describes them in another Yellow Woman tale, the "Story of Sun House," such unions are "drastic things which / must be done / for the world to continue / out of love for this earth." Significantly, in *Almanac* El Feo has an almost elemental connection to the land: it is rumored that he "was already married—married to the earth. They claimed El Feo had sexual intercourse four times a day with holes dug in the damp river clay." In fact, before meeting Angelita, he had never been sexually attracted to a woman, "he had felt passion only for retaking stolen tribal land" (Silko 468). At this moment of sexual union with Angelita, El Feo's vision of the world includes "all beings" (even Marx) and reveals the interconnected nature of individual relationships and communal well-being. El Feo's intense connection to the earth, his visions, and his sense that he is part of a larger story now unfolding demonstrate

this is a potentially world-transforming union that mirrors the relationship of Yellow Woman and the "Sun" katcina in the "Story of Sun House." Bernard A. Hirsch writes that in Silko's Yellow Woman tales, achieving "harmony requires a powerful and inclusive vision," and "the development of such a vision, and of the network of relationships to the land, the people, the stories, and oneself it fosters" is the "controlling idea" of this "Sun House" section of *Storyteller*.[12] This controlling idea is also at work in *Almanac*, as Silko frames the union between Angelita as Yellow Woman, and El Feo as Sun katcina, to be an inevitable and integral step in creating necessary changes for their community as well as other communities of indigenous and downtrodden peoples.

El Feo's comprehension of the importance of Angelita's role as a Yellow Woman within the movement is tested when he is confronted by its true meaning: her sexuality is fluid and does not belong to one partner. When El Feo peers into a fetish kept by his twin, Tacho, he sees a vision of Angelita having sex with Bartolomeo, her instructor at the Marxist school in Mexico City. Instead of feeling jealous or possessive, El Feo concludes that Angelita's relationship with Bartolomeo is an important alliance that needs to be maintained in order to achieve their goals. Through her connection to the Marxist school, Angelita has been able to secure the support of "friends of the Indians," a conglomeration comprised of "at least half a dozen foreign governments as well as underground groups" who supplied the army with "weaponry and supplies."[13] Thus, Angelita's relationship with Bartolomeo, and, by extension, the other Marxists, is strategic. In contrast, her alliance with the twin brothers El Feo and Tacho, who are leaders of the army, is both strategic and spiritual. Together they scheme behind the Marxists' backs and maintain the true agenda of the People's Army, which is more interested in retaking stolen land than establishing international Marxist labor coalitions.

Angelita, or "Comrade La Escapía," as the villagers—who are chagrined by her affiliation with the Marxist school—derisively call her, ostensibly allies herself with the Marxists but is not a communist. In fact, she is a "silent but ruthless critic of the months of 'political instruction'" she received at their school and "had clashed with the Cubans over which version, *whose* version, of history they would use" (emphasis mine).[14] Angelita's emphasis on indigenous history both draws her to Marxism and repels her from it. She celebrates Karl Marx for recognizing the inherent power of stories, but is quick to note that he and his cadre of intellectuals could never fully grasp the meaning of "*Commune* and *communal*" because "they were Europeans to start with, and anything, certainly any philosophy, would have been too feeble to curb the greed and sadism of centuries."[15] Here, Angelita displays a Foucauldian sense of the futility of employing a European system of economics and governance to undo the damage caused by a similar one. Thus, Angelita emphasizes that indigenous people of the Americas must look to their own traditions to reconnect with their past and discover solutions to their troubled present. Community organizer Syed Hussan—who has been active within the Idle No More Movement—agrees, insisting that successful "Decolonization is a dramatic reimagining of the relationships with land, people, and the state. . . . It is a practice; it is an unlearning."[16] Like Hussan, Angelita advocates this form of "unlearning," recognizing that for substantial change to take place, destructive

Euro-American modes of production and governance must be expunged from this discourse of decolonization.

Angelita's tribal-centrism contends with Bartolomeo's misguided Eurocentric Marxism and his usefulness as an ally soon runs out. He finds himself in the crosshairs of Angelita's ire for his remarks concerning "good Indians" and "treacherous tribalists"—the former being those who uncomplainingly take their orders from Marxists and the latter being those such as Angelita, who "hate Europeans, and who believe they know communism better than Lenin or Marx."[17] Moreover, Bartolomeo whitewashes Cuban history, refusing to acknowledge its indigenous leaders and the many indigenous uprisings against colonial powers. In response to these transgressions, Angelita establishes herself as a true radical leader. Accusing Bartolomeo of "crimes against the revolution," she places him under arrest, acting as a prosecutor at his trial. Winning the people's favor with her passionate articulation of his offenses, Angelita decries Bartolomeo's actions as a "denial and attempted annihilation of tribal histories" in the Americas; moreover, she accuses him of betraying "the true meaning of Marx," who "had never forgotten the indigenous people of the Americas, or of Africa."[18] While Angelita is drawn to Karl Marx as a human being with a passion for recording and disseminating stories of oppression, she views his understanding of communalism as being formed from a European epistemological standpoint, rendering it an unsuitable option for the empowerment of indigenous communities. Indeed, Angelita seems to be suggesting that European and Cuban Marxists are attempting only to mimic, but not adopt indigenous communalism; rather, they are adapting it to fit their own ends and preventing real change from taking place.

Angelita's trial oration then offers an indigenous history that chronicles the many indigenous uprisings that took place in the post-Columbian Americas. This retelling not only reinstates the connection between contemporary indigenous people and those who fought before them, but also what Angelita refers to as the "bigger picture": the union of many communities of oppressed peoples to rise against European hegemony. Literary scholar Channette Romero refers to this union in *Almanac* as "cross-cultural spiritual coalitions made up of 'tribal internationalists,'" which could wage a more successful campaign against Western imperialism than localized political and nationalistic movements alone.[19] Angelita reminds the crowd of the true meaning of *communal* while expanding its definition to reshape the future of the Americas. Moreover, Angelita argues that the conquest-inheriting, capitalist Destroyers themselves fear the power of these shared histories: they "had never wanted Native Americans to contemplate confederacies between the tribes of the Americas; that would mean the end of European domination."[20]

Angelita's oral testimony reiterates the power of oral tradition as a means of ensuring survival. As a Yellow Woman, she acts as a conduit through which colonialism can be dismantled. Her participation as a leader in the story unfolding is rooted in Yellow Woman traditional stories, but importantly, her use of storytelling as an integral part of her leadership can also be also seen in the Idle No More movement and indigenous communities at large. For example, the Kino-nda-niimi Collective write that "indigenous women have always been leaders in our communities . . .

women were on the front lines organizing events, standing up and speaking out. Grandmothers, mothers, aunties, sisters, and daughters sustained us, carried us, and taught through word, song, and story."[21] Angelita's stories are part of this inheritance, and she serves her community through preserving and retelling its powerful history. When Bartolomeo accuses his trial of being a "kangaroo court" and rails against the "'dumb and gullible squaws' who had confused themselves reading too many books with ideas that were over their heads," these counteraccusations fall upon deaf ears and he is hanged, effectively cutting the ties between the People's Army and the Cuban Marxists.[22]

While Tim Libretti argues that Silko "narratively enacts the synthesis of Marxism and indigenous, non-European cultural traditions of resistance," it is my contention that rather than synthesizing, Silko is problematizing European influence in indigenous uprisings.[23] If Bartolomeo is viewed as a proxy for European Marxism, his crime of dismissing the people in their own story of decolonization is its crime, and his hanging is the symbolic death of European Marxism or any European system attempting to control indigenous efforts toward decolonization. Angelita's rhetoric illustrates this point, engaging the crowd with: "Do we follow Marx? The answer is no! *No* white man politics! *No* white man Marx! No white man religion, no nothing *until we retake the land*!"[24] This statement apparently refers to political outsiders who are attempting to appropriate and amend the course of such a revolution, so one can infer that Angelita is not banning all non-indigenous people from participating. Instead, with Bartolomeo's death, the People's Army sheds its ties to the Marxists and emerges with three clear leaders, Angelita, El Feo, and Tacho, and in doing so, gains control over the ideological production for the revolution. Thus, a Marxist strategy of production control allows them to cut ties with Marxists themselves, and Angelita's charisma and wit become ideological weapons of the new indigenous-led, indigenous-centric movement.

Angelita's attributes as a successful, assertive leader are paralleled in another tale from *Storyteller*, entitled "Aunt Alice told my sisters and me this story one time." This story features a young girl named Kochininako, another name for Yellow Woman in Laguna Pueblo orature, whom Aunt Alice describes as a skilled hunter who can bring home meat "just like the boys and men did. *You know there have been Laguna women who . . . could hunt as well as any man*" (emphasis in original).[25] As the story begins, Kochininako is hunting when she meets a monstrous animal, described as a "giant" named "Estrucuyo," who chases her. She begins to throw him the rabbits hanging from her belt, causing Estrucuyo's pursuit to slow as he gobbles up the meat. After a long chase the giant corners Kochininako and demands that she hand over all of her possessions, including her bow and arrows, her knife, and her clothing. Worried because "whenever she gave the giant anything, he just took it and he still didn't go away, he just asked for more," Kochininako cleverly convinces Estrucuyo to let her enter a narrow cave to remove the rest of her clothing. Estrucuyo's giant bulk renders him unable to reach her, but now that she is trapped, Kochininako calls "for the Twin Brothers, the Hero Brothers . . . who were always out helping people who were in danger." Coming to Kochininako's aid, the brothers behead Estrucuyo and cut out his

heart. In a combined effort of wits, words, and actions, the three are able to defeat the monster that threatens them.[26]

The parallels between Kochininako's and Angelita's storylines are noteworthy. Like the hunter Kochininako, Angelita exemplifies masculine attributes: she is bold, "quick to laugh" off the accusations or insinuations of others, and is ruthless in her pursuit of justice. Even her detractors listen intently to her "because they had never heard a woman like her before."[27] Moreover, as seen in *Storyteller*'s twin brothers El Feo and Tacho, Kochininako is associated with powerful twins who possess mystical powers. Tacho interprets dreams and communicates with spirit macaws, while El Feo exhibits an intense, spiritual connection to the earth manifested in his sexual relationship with Angelita. In another parallel, a passage in *Almanac* recounts how in "the old days the Twin Brothers had answered the people's cry for help when terrible forces or great monsters threatened the people," just as in the "Aunt Alice" story the twins and the modern Kochininako face Estrucuyo—a monster which represents "vampire capitalism" feeding insatiably on the labor and livelihood of the exploited masses.[28]

If in "Aunt Alice" combining the powers of a Yellow Woman and the mystical twins suffices to topple the giant Estrucuyo, in *Almanac* the recontextualized union of these characters indicates that a profound change is taking place, one with the potential to deliver the people they serve from the grasp of the Destroyers. Their collective actions also demonstrate another parallel with the tenets of Idle No More, specifically that "indigenous solidarity cannot simply be accommodated within other struggles; it demands solidarity on its own terms."[29] Rejecting the siren song of multiculturalism and "post-racial" diversity, Angelita, her Twin accomplices, and the leaders of Idle No More embrace a more radical approach to decolonization that includes reinstating women in their roles as bearers of culture within indigenous nations.

The Destroyer

While Yellow Woman is traditionally associated with inciting positive change, there is also a destructive side to the power of Yellow Woman, and *Almanac of the Dead* includes a Yellow Woman who is allied with the Destroyers rather than fighting against them. As mentioned, in *Almanac* the Destroyers are "vampire capitalists," the inheritors to and progenitors of conquest. Destroyers are also perpetrators of witchcraft and "feed off energy released by destruction."[30] In Silko's short stories, Destroyers cause famine and death in communities; in *Almanac*, as with other figures in Laguna-Pueblo orature, Silko contextualizes them within a modern, industrialized setting in which they maintain their power through economic exploitation, sexual violence, and corporate greed. Characters such as Beaufrey, Serlo, and Trigg use technology as a weapon, targeting people of color, women, the impoverished, and the homeless. The Yellow Woman in their company, Alegria Martinez-Soto, shares their love of wealth and disregard for the lives of others. However, the text shows unexpected parallels between her and Angelita La Escapía. Not only do they share a lover in Bartolomeo—whom they both come to despise, though only Angelita makes good on her homicidal thoughts toward him—both women recognize the issues inherent with European

Marxism and its adherents in the novel. But unlike Angelita, a leader in the People's Army, Alegria has no concern for anyone except herself.

Silko has stated that in most stories, Yellow Woman's "triumph is achieved by her sensuality, not through violence or destruction"; this is seen in the "Cottonwood Tales" found in *Storyteller*, both of which feature a Yellow Woman (Kochininako) engaging with katcina spirits for the benefit of her people.[31] However, Silko explains that there are stories in which Yellow Woman "chooses to join the secret Destroyer Clan, which worships death and destruction."[32] *Storyteller* contains an early example of this Yellow Woman appositive: Kochininako from "Estoy-eh-muut and the Kunideeyahs," who allies herself with the Kunideeyahs, witches who sow destruction in her community. In *Almanac*, Alegria is also a Yellow Woman who can be a malevolent force but in a contemporary context. While a Yellow Woman's presence in her stories can be either beneficial or inimical, she remains a powerful force whose influence on the future of a community depends on the character of her bedfellows.

A comparison of the two texts reveals both their similarities and the ways in which Silko reconceives Yellow Woman for a contemporary context. In "Estoy-eh-muut and the Kunideeyahs," Kochininako and the Kunideeyahs use witchcraft against her people, shapeshifting into animals, murdering travelers and children, placing curses on people and their crops, and engaging in cannibalism and bestiality. The effects of their witchcraft can be observed in the environmental conditions of the pueblo: "the corn plants had been sickly that year / and the worms devoured all the bean plants." Kochininako's husband Estoy-eh-muut has been feeling ill himself and quickly discovers that his wife drugs him in order to join the Kunideeyahs in their nightly revels. After Kochininako attempts to kill him, Estoy-eh-muut entreats Grandmother Spider to help him to stop his wife, so she weaves a coil of yucca fiber for him, which she instructs him to roll toward Kochininako from a safe distance. [33] When Estoy-eh-muut rolls the coil toward Kochininako it becomes a rattlesnake that strikes and kills her.[34] In this story, Kochininako chooses destruction rather than living in a harmonious relationship with her land and her people. That such drastic action must be taken in order to counteract her insidious presence testifies to her ability as a Yellow Woman to either maintain or disrupt the balance of the entire community.

Much like Kochininako in this "Estoy-eh-muut" tale, Alegria Martinez-Soto in *Almanac* also accepts destruction as a means of achieving self-gratification. Kochininako cannibalizes the physical bodies of her people and compromises their crops and livestock, while Alegria cannibalizes the people of Mexico economically and culturally, basking in the riches gleaned from exploited labor and colonial inheritance. Intelligent and cunning, Alegria is a promising young architect who designs an elaborate home for an arms dealer named Menardo, with whom she begins an affair, and his wife Illiana. While a Yellow Woman's sexual activity is not her sole trademark, these relationships signal her identity in important ways. In one notable scene, Alegria's seduction of Menardo ends in embarrassment—an unfortunate case of premature ejaculation. Afterwards Alegria lies on the hotel bed and notices that the light in the room has turned into a "rich chrome-yellow."[35] Together, her brazen sexuality and the yellow light in the room signal that she is a Yellow Woman, a figure associated with

fertility symbolized by corn pollen and the "ritual color of the east."[36] But this yellow light has a metallic "chrome" quality that reflects her Destroyer society's obsession with technology and its exploitation of nature for its own ends. While Yellow Woman's trysts often take place in a natural setting and involve a katcina spirit such as Buffalo Man or Whirlwind Man, Alegria's sexual partners make their money through bloodshed and corruption, facts that do not dissuade her from continuing the relationships. As the novel unfolds, she becomes even more mercenary and individualistic, attributes that she shares with her predecessor in *Storyteller*.

Alegria's full immersion into Destroyer culture begins when her affair with Menardo is exposed, costing Alegria her job. When the stairs in the house she designed for Menardo and Illiana cause the latter to tumble to her death, Alegria reluctantly marries Menardo, accepting the role of a trophy wife. She soon grows weary of his company and begins a sexual relationship with one of his clients, Sonny Blue. In order to avoid suspicion, Sonny Blue gives Menardo a present: a bulletproof vest, ostensibly to keep him safe from the attacks of rebel factions. Formerly, Menardo had been plagued by nightmares of his assassination at the hands of "Indians"; soon after he receives the vest, he becomes obsessed with the intricacies of its high-tech design and views it as "a triumph of modern science—man-made fiber, rayon, nylon, and now the deceptively thin and soft fibers of 'wonder fabric' that stopped all bullets and knife blades."[37] He begins wearing the vest constantly, even when he sleeps, further alienating him from Alegria, who moves to a different room. This triumph of technology grants Menardo peace of mind and a sense of security that allows Alegria to carry on her affair with impunity.

The vest and its effect on Menardo closely resemble a charm Kochininako employs in "Estoy-eh-muut and the Kunideeyahs." In both story and novel, the magic of the Destroyers distracts and narcotizes the husband in order for the wife to continue her misdeeds with impunity. In the story, Estoy-eh-muut pretends to sleep as Kochininako places something next to him in the bed. "'Dark purple corn,' Kochininako said softly, 'Keep Estoy-eh-muut asleep while I am gone. Don't let him awake until I return.'"[38] The "dark purple corn" contains magical properties; similarly, Menardo believes that when he wears the vest, he becomes a man made "invincible with the magic of high technology."[39] In this phrase, technology and magic are not mutually exclusive, but rather, technology is a form of magic. The parallels between these two stories indicate a pattern that unfolds repeatedly in time: the traditional story is a precedent for the contemporary version. And as Grandmother Spider demonstrates, rather than being archaic remnants of a forgotten past, stories are cyclical and continue to offer culturally relevant pathways that lead from suffering toward resolution.

Almanac's contemporary version differs, however, in that not only the Yellow Woman wife, but her husband too is a Kunideeyah. Thus Menardo, spellbound by the power of the vest, succumbs to the "magic of high technology," and to prove the vest's impregnability, orders his driver, Tacho, to shoot him at point-blank range in the chest. Tacho reluctantly obeys, and Menardo is killed by the shot, just as Kochininako was killed by Grandmother Spider's yucca fiber. In this version, Menardo is a Destroyer who falls victim to his own arrogance. His foolhardy orchestration of his own death

to stage this demonstration of the vest's power proved what the "old prophets" of the villages had said, that the "white man would someday disappear all by himself," due to their rapacious greed and dearth of spiritual connection to their history and to the land.[40] While Menardo is a native Mexican, he turned his back on his family and heritage long before, and is thus another doomed Destroyer without a past, a spiritual mooring to the land, or a rubric for survival.

What can be gleaned from Silko's translation of orature into a short story and then into a novel is that, despite changes in characterizations, technologies, and resolutions, a common thread persists: the people can liberate themselves from Destroyers by seeking answers in their own cultural inheritance. As we have seen, Estoy-eh-muut consults Grandmother Spider for assistance with overcoming evil Kochininako, and Angelita La Escapía's relationship with the mystical Twins—who are deeply connected to stories and the land to which they belong—enables her to have her own visions of the impending revolution. Even Alegria the Destroyer confirms the importance of privileging Native epistemologies and ontologies over non-indigenous ones, and she is also cognizant of the limitations of the doctrines that the Marxists espouse. As Harsha Walia explains in "Decolonizing Together," in order for non-Natives to meaningfully participate in decolonization, we "must recognize our own role in *perpetuating* colonialism within our solidarity efforts."[41] Although Alegria recognizes her role in perpetuating injustice, she refuses to change her behavior to meaningfully participate in eradicating it.

Her dealings with the Marxists, particularly Bartolomeo, lead her to make some interesting critiques concerning their capacity for true revolution. She teases Bartolomeo about "*New World* being the terminology of the exploiter," and upon discovering a group of them attempting to wire a bomb, observes that she been around them long enough to "know that their grasp of dialectics was weak; she feared their grasp of wiring blasting caps to explosives might be even weaker." She listens to Bartolomeo's associates waxing philosophical about revolution and struggles against interjecting that only a few of them did not directly benefit from the exploited labor of Indians. But she cannot keep quiet after a drunken Marxist tells her to "Stay with your own kind," retorting "I know my own kind! The bourgeois! You are one and the same as me!"[42] In this exchange, Alegria not only recognizes her own privilege, but she also demands that the young Marxist admit that she experiences the same privilege and is also complicit in the exploitation against which she claims to revolt. While Alegria has no interest in anything besides her own comfort, she identifies the European and Cuban Marxists as ineffectual and oblivious to their own privilege and recognizes the drawbacks of replacing one Euro-American system (capitalism) with another (Marxism).

In what is perhaps her most radical moment, Alegria realizes the Marxists were not only blind to their own complicity in oppression, but that they would continue to dismiss Alegria even if she did agree "that the system that starved and destroyed human beings for the profit of a few was a system that must fall from the sheer weight of the bodies of the dead."[43] At times, Alegria vacillates between desiring to take part in radical change and desiring to be pampered. Her ambivalence and her destructive

tendencies make her one of the most interesting characters in the novel. Silko states in an interview that she had originally planned to kill off Alegria but discovered that she "really kind of liked something about her. [Alegria is] so ruthless. But I guess what I loved about her was that, by God, she was determined to survive."[44]

Alegria consciously chooses to be a Destroyer, but she is concomitantly an insider and an incisive critic of their practices, and begins to realize their reign in the Americas is nearing its end. Like Angelita, who speaks of imminent change on the horizon, Alegria senses an impending revolution. She "imagined a map of the world suspended in darkness until suddenly a tiny flame blazed up, followed by others, to form a burning necklace of revolution across two American continents."[45] Alegria's portentous vision demonstrates that she understands this change will originate in interconnected, multi-national uprisings, reinforcing the importance of indigenous peoples working across borders to overthrow the yoke of settler colonialism. While the "burning necklace" of Idle No More is less of a violent uprising than the impending revolution forecast in *Almanac*, what persists as a link between these two movements is the spirit of a modern, international revolution: of "def[ying] orthodox politics" that sacrifice people and environment in favor of profit, and of combining tradition and technology to link geographically and culturally separate communities in order to effect change on a global scale. Both *Almanac* and Idle No More demonstrate how fluidity is not tantamount to an erasure of tradition, but instead allows it to continue to flourish, despite its cultural context.[46] Ultimately, through her complex identity as a vampire capitalist *and* a critic of Euro-American culture, Alegria is more than just a Destroyer; she is a force to be reckoned with, a Yellow Woman who saved her own life from her author.

The Ally

While the Yellow Women Alegria and Angelita emphasize that white society will disappear from the Americas, the third Yellow Woman, Seese the "Ally," demonstrates that Silko's vision isn't as totalizing as it may seem. As a non-Native Yellow Woman, Seese demonstrates how non-Native people can meaningfully participate in the dismantling of Destroyer culture, both in *Almanac* and contemporary movements such as Idle No More as well. Seese's characterization and the unexpected role she plays demonstrate that when the events described in the almanac come to pass, it is Destroyer society that will disappear—not those people who abandon it in favor of a more balanced, less exploitative existence with the land and their fellow human beings. As Channette Romero explains, in *Almanac* Silko works to avoid repeating the mistakes of previous writing efforts "by overcoming the divisiveness and limitations of secular politics with the expansiveness of coalition politics that connect individuals 'through time' and space to each other."[47] Seese is part of this attempt, working as an ally with Lecha, the Yaqui psychic who possesses the almanac and directs Seese's transcriptions. Even Angelita La Escapía, although she abolishes "white man politics" from the People's Army's repertoire, allows that there is space for such allies within the movement, remarking that "converts were always welcome; Mother Earth embraced the souls of all who loved her."[48]

Silko has clarified that a Yellow Woman is often an outsider to her own society, "one who shatters the cultural paradigms or steps through or steps out" of line.[49] Seese's ability to incite beneficial change is not tied to *her* society; instead, exhibiting the fluidity associated with Yellow Woman, she finds another community to serve, one that has the potential to heal rather than destroy. Seese is markedly different from the female characters in *Almanac* I have been describing, but her initial outsider status, her separation from family, and her willingness to step out of her comfort zone and engage with the unfamiliar are attributes she shares with Silko's other Yellow Women. And although Seese begins the novel on the periphery of her own community, her marginalization helps her find a new community much like the transnational, trans-indigenous coalition of Idle No More, one built on "Indigenous self-determination" while also being "intertwined with struggles against racism, poverty, police violence, war and occupation, violence against women and environmental justice."[50] Here Seese finds a safe haven from the violence and exploitation of Destroyer society.

Before her arrival at the ranch to live with Lecha and her twin sister Zeta—another set of twins connected to a Yellow Woman—Seese's personal history is a sordid tale of addictions to cocaine, alcohol, and unhealthy sexual relationships, all stemming from the patriarchal paradigm she inhabits. When the reader first encounters her, she is alone and searching for her baby, who has been kidnapped by Beaufrey and the baby's father David. Seese's infatuation with David, a bisexual artist who has a sexual relationship with Beaufrey, leads to two pregnancies. David and Beaufrey coerce her into terminating the first pregnancy, but she carries her next pregnancy to term and gives birth to her son Monte. Seese is haunted by the memory of her terminated first pregnancy, dreaming that Beaufrey is taking an active part in the procedure and envisioning "dozens of yellow rosebuds . . . scattered over a hospital bed with white sheets. The rosebuds have wilted, and the edges of the petals have dried up."[51] In Laguna-Pueblo cosmology yellow is the color associated with femininity and fecundity; in Seese's dream the yellow roses are dried and lifeless, signifying death rather than fertility. Seese also recalls the "chrome-yellow hue of light" in the room where the procedure took place, the same color Alegria observed after she seduced Menardo. Both women see this specific yellow light when they have compromised themselves to appease or please powerful, destructive men; men who desire to exert control over the women's bodies, whether in a sexual or reproductive capacity.

As Paula Gunn Allen explains, in many indigenous communities the fertility of women is associated with "continuity" and the "creative power of thought," but for Seese, this creative reproductive power is appropriated and controlled by Destroyers.[52] David and Beaufrey's cruel interference with Seese's role as a mother—culminating with Beaufrey's murder of Monte later in the novel—is not only destructive to her, but also to her community and its survival. Suffering is not unusual in Yellow Woman stories, many of which begin with the protagonist and her community living in a state of distress, often in the form of drought or famine. The Yellow Woman in *Storyteller*'s "Cottonwood Tales: Part One" searches for water for her family, but no matter where she looks she finds only drought: "the water had dried up / the earth there / wasn't even damp when she touched it."[53] Mired in hopeless situations, she is willing to go to

great lengths to preserve and protect her family. While Seese is non-indigenous, she is similarly plagued by fears for her son's safety and memories of dried-up rose petals.

However, Yellow Woman is a transitional figure who embodies the need for change and fluidity in order to survive, and Seese's last resort is to seek out Lecha, a renowned psychic, who invites her to live at the ranch and work as payment for Lecha's assistance. Seese's transition from drug addict to unlikely ally begins as she helps Lecha transcribe the ancient almanac that has survived Hernán Cortés' massacre of the tribes of Mexico. Despite her position as a cultural outsider, Seese is allowed to participate in transcribing this sacred text, which contains "countless physical and spiritual properties to guide the people and make them strong" as well as "prophecies relating to the future of the Americas."[54] The relative isolation of Yellow Women from their communities allows them to occupy a liminal space. Victor Turner argues that such liminal entities, with their "ambiguous and indeterminate attributes," are essential in moments of "ritualized . . . cultural transition."[55] Seese's liminality allows her to take part in the ritual of transcribing the almanac, an act of cultural transition for not only herself, but for the communities of indigenous people for whom the almanac was written. Seese importantly represents a force of decolonization that works with and within communities of Native peoples; in her work with the almanac she is an ally who can contribute to the movement in a meaningful and culturally appropriate manner. Reciprocity is also important in the work of an ally; as Seese desires Lecha's help in finding Monte, she must be willing to give something back in return.

Many of the concepts that guide critical discussions of non-Native allies often take place in Native American literary studies, and these concepts also shape Seese's role in *Almanac*. Walia claims that non-Native allies must orient themselves as "active and integral participants in a decolonization movement for political liberation, social transformation, renewed cultural kinships, and the development of an economic system that serves rather than threatens our collective life on this planet."[56] As a recovering (and at times, lapsed) cocaine addict with a checkered past, Seese may not be the ideal critical ally that Walia conceptualizes, but nonetheless, despite her many missteps along the way, Seese is both active in and integral to Lecha's almanac project. Even though initially Seese is not invested in the project and participates in exchange for Lecha's help, she still contributes to crafting a resistance strategy. On a microcosmic level, their relationship is mutually beneficial; on a macrocosmic one, it could potentially have widespread effects.

Seese's work also allows her to transform herself. By abandoning her previous life and in her involvement with transcribing the almanac, she moves from participating in the Destroyer culture to joining the alliance aimed at their destruction, crossing cultural boundaries. Gregory Salyer argues that in her ability to cross these barriers, Seese "has experienced the sacred in a way that demonstrates the ultimate interrelationship of all things, including the stories to the land and identity."[57] While a Yellow Woman often encounters the sacred by engaging in a sexual relationship with a katcina spirit, Seese's work with the almanac causes her to experience the power of its stories herself. She experiences an "almost narcotic effect" as she works with "a strange passage in Lecha's transcriptions of the notebooks . . . during the day she was aware of the

weight of her body, and felt as if she were drowning in air and light." Later she has a dream that deeply disturbs her. As she records a description of it on the computer used for Lecha's almanac transcriptions, she realizes that her son is dead.[58] Within Native American epistemological frameworks, Kimberly Roppolo explains, "knowledge can be gained visually—as through 'visions' and 'dreams'—as visual thinking is part of the holistic thinking equation." Caused by her work with the almanac, Seese's physical and metaphysical reactions indicate that the ancient text is not a "dead thing on a shelf," but vital. Further, Roppolo terms it an "intertribal text," capable of extending its influence across cultural and racial lines.[59] While the Yellow Women found in *Storyteller* were tied to particular, insular communities, Seese and Lecha (and Angelita) work on a transnational, trans-indigenous scale to facilitate decolonization, and both the *Almanac of the Dead* and the almanac it chronicles become allegories for more inclusive campaigns to achieve that goal.

Later in the novel, Seese joins Lecha on a trip to South Dakota to meet with movement leaders, now part of what Ami M. Regier identifies as Silko's "coalition of the dispossessed," people who are "Indigenous by heritage, international peoples of color, various political subgroups, and homeless and imprisoned populations of the United States."[60] Seese is such a dispossessed person because she has no true cultural or familial ties, and while she is non-indigenous, her transition from victim to unlikely ally means that there will be room for her in the coalition. According to El Feo, the leader of the People's Army, the willing are welcome, and 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."[61] Seese has "ceased" being a part of Destroyer society and, becoming an ally, is adopting what Stephanie Irlbacher-Fox refers to as "co-existence through *co-resistance*," showing how "settlers" can participate "by making change in our own systems and among other settlers, taking our cue from Indigenous action and direction" (emphasis mine).[62] Seese's transcription of the almanac, together with Silko's foreshadowing of her continued participation in the struggle against the Destroyers, demonstrates this co-resistance and how it can be deployed. Throughout *Almanac,* Seese engages in trademark behaviors of a Yellow Woman as Gunn Allen describes them, including "eluding or escaping from malintentioned spirits" and, even more importantly, "getting power from spirit worlds and returning it to the people."[63] By working closely with people within the movement instead of attempting to impinge her own beliefs upon them, as the Marxists did, Seese demonstrates the potential for allies to meaningfully participate in decolonization.

The Story That Continues to Unfold

The Yellow Women in this text never directly interact with one another, but nonetheless they are powerfully connected by the damage wrought by continued colonialism. Whether they are complicit within systems of oppression or seek to dismantle them, they are part of a larger narrative that demonstrates the power and necessity of interconnectivity between seemingly disparate people. Perhaps now, more than ever before,

as Idle No More has become such a powerful—and, frankly, viral—phenomenon, we can see the potential of such a global, trans-indigenous, and transnational unification as Silko envisions it in *Almanac of the Dead*. As in *Almanac*, women are the nexus of this change. Women from different racial and cultural backgrounds began Idle No More's campaign against those corporate and political interests that are bent on further desecration of land and indigenous rights, and have ignited the "burning necklace" Alegria imagines in the novel. Ultimately, *Almanac* provides a vision of how the yoke of settler-colonialism and its structures of exploitation and degradation could be undermined or shaken off through indigenous epistemologies and the unified efforts of cross-cultural groups.

While the novel imagines change spreading from the south, Idle No More comes from the north, allying North Americans together with indigenous and non-indigenous people on other continents in protest against broken treaties, environmental degradation, and the possible Keystone XL-Pipeline. Irlbacher-Fox writes that for non-Natives, the "gift that [Idle No More] stands to impart . . . [is] one of both awareness and self-awareness, sustaining a basis for a fundamental shift toward decolonizing settler consciousness, creating a tool for fashioning a shared future of all of our children in the shape of justice."[64] Even if their means to an end seem to differ, both Silko's vision and the work of the transnational cohorts that comprise Idle No More seem to convey the same message: the people are coming, and, according to Angelita, the "Great Dark Angel," the "best [is] yet to come."[65]

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Notes

1. *Indian Country Media Today Media Network*, "Chief Theresa Spence Ends Fast with 13-Point Declaration of Commitment to First Nations," http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2013/01/24/chief-theresa-spence-ends-fast-13-point-declaration-commitment-first-nations-147195.

2. Leslie Marmon Silko, *Storyteller* (New York: Seaver, 1981), 6.

3. Jace Weaver, "Native Authors and Their Communities," *Wicazo Sa Review* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 78.

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5. The Kino-nda-niimi Collective, "Idle No More: The Winter We Danced," *The Winter We Danced: Voices From the Past, the Future, and the Idle No More Movement*, ed. The Kino-nda-niimi Collective (Winnipeg, Manitoba: ARP Books, 2014), 22.

6. Silko, *Almanac*, 518.

7. Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 88.

8. Silko, *Storyteller*, 54–62.

9. Ibid., 84.

10. Leslie Marmon Silko, *Almanac of the Dead* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 468; *Almanac* will be used for all subsequent references.

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12. 12 Bernard A. Hirsch. "The Telling Which Continues": Oral Tradition and the Written Word in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller*," *Yellow Woman: Leslie Marmon Silko*, ed. Melody Graulich (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 171.

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14. Ibid., 310, 314.

15. Ibid., 314, 316.

16. Harsha Walia, "Decolonizing Together: Moving beyond a Politics of Solidarity toward a Practice of Decolonization," *The Winter We Danced*, 45.

17. Ibid., 514, 327.

18. Ibid., 515, 314–15.

19. Channette Romero, "Envisioning a 'Network of Tribal Coalitions': Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*," *American Indian Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (Fall 2002): 623.

20. Silko, *Almanac*, 530.

21. The Kino-nda-niimi Collective, "Idle No More," 23.

22. Silko, *Almanac*, 525.

23. Tim Libretti, "The Other Proletarians: Native American Literature and Class Struggle," *Modern Fiction Studies* 47, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 168.

24. Silko, *Almanac*, 518.

25. Silko, *Storyteller*, 82.

26. Ibid., 84–86.

27. Silko, *Almanac*, 468.

28. Ibid., 475.

29. Walia, "Decolonizing Together," 46.

30. Silko, *Almanac*, 336.

31. Silko, *Yellow Woman*, 72.

32. Ibid., 70.

33. Grandmother Spider is a creatrix in Laguna-Pueblo orature, described as a "divine figure [who] uses the power of her imagination, womb, abdominal spinneret glands, intellect, emotions, and voice to bring humans into existence and help them develop balanced identities and harmonious communities." Matthew Teory, "Spinning a Bigendered Identity in Silko's Ceremony and Puig's Kiss of the Spider Woman," *Comparative Literature Studies* 47, no. 1 (2010): 1.

34. Silko, *Storyteller*, 141–154.

35. Silko, *Almanac*, 285.

36. Silko. *Yellow Woman*, 71.

37. Silko, *Almanac*, 497.

38. Silko, *Storyteller*, 144.

39. Silko, *Almanac*, 503.

40. Ibid., 503, 511.

41. Walia, "Decolonizing Together," 49.

42. Silko, *Almanac*, 278, 307; emphasis in original.

43. Ibid., 307.

44. Donna Perry, *Backtalk: Women Writers Speak Out, Interviews by Donna Perry* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 330.

45. Silko, *Almanac*, 507.

46. The Kino-nda-niimi Collective, 23.

47. Romero, 623.

48. Silko, *Almanac*, 736.

49. Kim Barnes, "A Leslie Marmon Silko Interview," *Yellow Woman: Leslie Marmon Silko*, ed. Melody Graulich (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press), 57.

50. Walia, "Decolonizing Together," 45.

51. Silko, *Almanac*, 52.

52. Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*, 148.

53. Silko, *Storyteller*, 68.

54. The almanac was taken by a group of children, charged with preserving the historical account of their people by traveling north. Despite the likelihood that they would not all survive the trip, "the people knew if even part of their *Almanac* survived, they as a people would return someday" (Silko, *Almanac,* 246).

55. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969), 95.

56. Walia, "Decolonizing Together," 45.

57. Gregory Salyer, *Leslie Marmon Silko* (New York: Twayne, 1997), 78.

58. Silko, *Almanac,* 592, 595.

59. Kimberley Roppolo, "Vision, Voice, and Intertribal Metanarrative: the American Indian Visual-Rhetorical Tradition and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*," *American Indian Quarterly* 31, no. 4 (2007): 535–45.

60. Ami M. Regier, "Material Meeting Points of Self and Other: Fetish Discourses and Leslie Marmon Silko's Evolving Conception of Cross-Cultural Narrative," *Leslie Marmon Silko: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Louise K. Barnett and James L. Thorson (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1999), 198.

61. Silko, *Almanac*, 710.

62. Stephanie Irlbacher-Fox, "#idlenomore: Settler Responsibility for Relationship," *The Winter We Danced*, 223.

63. Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*, 88.

64. Irlbacher-Fox, "#idlenomore," 225.

65. Silko, *Almanac*, 749.