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The Power of Borders in Native American Literature: Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*

BERNIE HARDER

The historic 1999 declaration signed by the leaders of the National Congress of American Indians from the United States and the Assembly of First Nations from Canada identified areas of common concern, including: "Protecting and promoting the right of our citizens to move freely across the borders of Canada and the United States while retaining full recognition of their status as members of indigenous cultures."¹ State borders continue to be the locus of conflict between Native peoples and dominant societies internationally. The fragmentation that the nation-state imposes on indigenous nations and peoples is a result of conflicting constructions of space, culture, and identity. The dominant discourse, as Michael J. Shapiro argues,² has sought to take the legitimacy of the sovereignty of the nation-state for granted as a natural situation, even though the borders themselves may shift and prove to be unstable. But the idea of the national state is itself unstable once "the construction of national stories that legitimate the state boundaries of inclusion and exclusion" are identified for what they are—"a primary normalizing strategy."³

Matthew Coon Come, grand chief of the Assembly of First Nations in Canada, explained how borders have functioned to fragment Native nations in Canada:

Actually, most Aboriginal peoples have been artificially split by the imposition of Provincial and various other boundaries across this land, whether in the West, the East, the Prairies or the North.... And where we were not split by boundaries, the provisions of the Indian Act have

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seen to it that our peoples were divided into hopelessly small, but conveniently manageable, local units the government calls "bands."⁴

Borders, as a means of controlling indigenous peoples in the Americas, in East Timor, in Australia, and elsewhere, have contributed to the problem that Matthew Coon Come identifies succinctly in his address: "the current social state of aboriginal peoples . . . is a national tragedy and disgrace."⁵ C. Murray Sinclair, First Nations leader and associate chief judge of Manitoba, also cites examples of how reserve borders were used to control and disadvantage Native people in Saskatchewan. In his discussion of the historical factors contributing to the high rate of suicide among the aboriginal population, he explains that the "pass system" was requested and designed by the Canadian military after the Saskatchewan rebellion in 1885⁶ in which Gabriel Dumont and "Louis Riel, another Métis leader, sought to form a provisional government in Saskatchewan."⁷ Indian people could not leave the reserve without the written permission of the Indian agent.⁸ The pass system is just one of the many destructive ways dominant societies have used borders to control indigenous peoples.

Leslie Marmon Silko's second novel, *Almanac of the Dead*, exposes the illusions inherent in such strategies by challenging the legitimacy of the dominant ideology with alternative views grounded in an older historical reality of the First Nations in North and Central America. She addresses the conflict between Native peoples and Eurocentric society. The novel demonstrates that the state's right to exist in America is based on force, not legitimate power: "The white man only knew one way to control himself and others and that was with brute force."⁹ Power, as practiced by the state, is weak in comparison to the nature of power that protects the sovereignty of tribal people. The problem of borders shifts radically from the illegitimacy of particular borders to the illegitimacy of the state itself as an instrument of colonial oppression against historically valid nations, such as the many First Nations on Turtle Island—America. As Shapiro asserts, "Every practice which strengthens boundaries produces new modes of marginalized difference."¹⁰ Boundaries are dysfunctional for Native communities, but Silko, writing from a position outside of both the dominant and Marxist discourses, explores how the power conflict represented by borders highlights the independent identity and cultural space of indigenous peoples. She exposes the illegality and vice inherent in the ideas and practices of the nation-state. As described in detail in Janet St. Clair's article, the novel "portrays a nightmarish wasteland of violence, bestiality, cruelty, and crime. Deformed by grotesque familial relationships and debauched by sexual perversion, its characters are incapable of love."¹¹

BORDERS IN SILKO'S NOVEL

At the heart of Silko's superb *Almanac of the Dead* is the almanac itself that Lecha is transcribing and translating. It records a fragmented story of the indigenous peoples in the novel just as the novel itself tells a more comprehensive story. The novel is about an almanac, and becomes an almanac itself.

The revolution will happen once the story of the almanac is known, as expressed in Barefoot Hopi's words: "Rejoice! We are no longer solitary beings alone and cut off. Now we are one with the earth, our mother; we are one with the river. Now we have returned to our source, the energy of the universe. Rejoice!"¹² This connection to the earth is crucial. As First Nations author, Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm, explains, "Who you are as an Indigenous person arises from your connection to the land and to all others who share it."¹³ The success of the revolution may require centuries, but its rationale is totally comprehensible as the focus of the narrative moves back and forth between the dominant and indigenous societies on both sides of the Mexican-US border.

Silko continues to use the relationship between story and novel that she established in her first novel, *Ceremony*; this novel about the healing power of ceremony is itself a ceremony, as the opening poem explains:

I will tell you something about stories [he said],
They are not just entertainment.
Don't be fooled.
They are all we have, you see,
all we have to fight off
illness and death.¹⁴

The story about healing becomes the medicine.

Almanac of the Dead, similarly, is about a particular almanac but is itself an almanac that will bring about change in society by clarifying the difference between the institutionalized destruction protected by the nation-state and the spiritual power of Native Americans, as well as many Afro-Americans and Europeans—anyone in harmony with the ancestral spirits. The novel is a story about war, a war fought with the power of words against the state.

This idea of the story as a weapon in the war for survival is part of an established tradition in Native literature, as represented in Gerald Vizenor's *Wordarrows: Indians and Whites in the New Fur Trade*. Vizenor quotes N. Scott Momaday to explain that "For the arrowmaker [Momaday, and the other storymakers and wordmakers], language represented the only chance for survival." He explains that "the arrowmakers and wordmakers survive in the wars with sacred memories."¹⁵ Silko's vision of survival is transformed into the wordarrows of the novel, confronting the legitimacy of state power with a different view of power derived from the sacred stories of indigenous peoples.

The detailed descriptions of personal and institutional oppression and abuse in the novel are not concerned with moral judgement, but with demonstrating the different kinds of power. Euro-American society is fundamentally destructive and contributes to its own destruction, as is the case with the Police Chief Menardo who disrespects his ancestors and the spirits. He relies on his bullet-proof vest and is killed when he foolishly asks Tacho to shoot at him point blank "to demonstrate his invincibility."¹⁶ Euro-American society—and anyone ascribing to its values—embodies its own destruction and the consequent survival of the earth and its peoples.

Silko facilitates the victory and survival of tribal people by exposing the problems of the various borders and boundaries that have been established by Euro-American society. The box on her map at the beginning of the novel entitled "THE INDIAN CONNECTION" focuses a central theme:

Sixty million Native Americans died between 1500 and 1600. The defiance and resistance to things European continue unabated. 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.

The whole novel is concerned with examining the nature of borders and boundaries: state borders, treaty boundaries, and boundaries between white and Native America; between European religions and Native spirituality; between dehumanization and spiritual wisdom; among different systems of education, justice, and government; between lies and truth; and between Native peoples themselves divided by their loyalties to the institutions of dominant society and their allegiance to their traditional teachings. All these borders, and more, such as those defining prisons, reservations, states, and private property, interact with each other; they are different layers of the geographical borders. They legitimize each other from the dominant view of the state but are negated by the worldview and history of Native Americans who expose the inherent fallacies about control.

CHALLENGING BORDERS FOR SURVIVAL

One has to remember that borders of nation-states are not physically located or concrete. We may encounter them in the heart of the country or anywhere. They exist even inside enemy territory at embassies, and sometimes they run right through the middle of a house or tribal nation. They also exist somewhere on the ocean, up in the air, and in outer space, but no one knows exactly where these lines are located or how to mark them on a globe. No two state borders have the same meaning because their significance is determined in many different ways that vary according to the relationships among the territories.

In *Almanac of the Dead*, the character Mosca explains the main difference between the value systems of white society and Native peoples: "Europeans did not listen to the souls of the dead. That was the root of all trouble for Europeans."¹⁷ His explanations and the novel's narrative demonstrate how this difference is pivotal in the ideologies about territory, land, power, society, treaties, religion, politics, and virtually everything, including individual behavior.

The common element connecting these discourses revolves around contrasting ideas about control as expressed in Lecha's arguments after her encounter with the Mexican Border Patrol: "Lecha said the white man had always been trying to 'control' the border when no such thing existed to control except in the white man's mind."¹⁸ The state takes the legitimacy of borders for granted and uses them to control tribal people. Lecha's arguments

that they are based on images in the mind agrees with Homi K. Bhabha's argument that "nations, like narratives, . . . only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye."¹⁹ Native Americans, on the other hand, evolve their relationships from the spiritual teachings of the ancestors. These teachings still require human involvement, as Mosca explains: "ancestor spirits had the answers, but you had to be able to interpret messages sent in the language of the spirits."²⁰ The relationship to society, territory, and the earth is based on understanding the teachings of the spirits rather than on control based on human ideas.

The motivation for Silko's challenge to the legitimacy of borders is survival—the struggle against spiritual, cultural, and physical genocide that characterizes the history of the Americas since the coming of the Europeans. According to Dee Horne in her discussion of Native literature, "Restructuring colonial cultural landscapes in North America is a matter of survival for American Indians."²¹

"The Destroyers, humans who were attracted to and excited by death and the sight of blood and suffering," the forces of destructive sorcery and witchery, also existed in the Americas before Europeans came.²² Silko's novel, *Ceremony*, makes this point as well:

This world was already complete
even without white people.
There was everything
including witchery.²³

According to Tacho, one of the main liberators in *Almanac of the Dead*, the coming of the Europeans intensifies the destruction that already existed as part of the activities of the "dynasties of sorcerer-sacrificers."²⁴ Silko neither accepts simplistic dichotomies of any kind, nor idealizes indigenous peoples, so that the difference lies in the choices that people make rather than in fundamental differences.

Borders position tribal people against each other, as part of the colonizer's attempts to exert control over subaltern peoples. Silko explains her objections to borders in her brief statement included in *Reclaiming the Vision*, an anthology celebrating the 1992 conference of Native writers in Oklahoma. She argues that borders are a way of getting Native peoples to ignore tribal peoples in other countries so that the United States government can prepare "to send tribal Native people out to kill other tribal Native people around the world."²⁵ This concern partly explains her rejection of borders:

What we need to do is to forget about international boundaries which have been set up, in my view, to perpetuate exploitation, genocide, and ultimately the destruction of the world. We've got to see that we belong to the world. We have a worldwide role—we always have—which joins us together with other tribal people who are still close to the earth.²⁶

Borders act as an instrument of control, absorbing tribal people into the state and shifting the conflict between the state and tribal nations to a conflict between states. This realignment obscures the real nature of the struggle, identified, for example, by Calabazas in *Almanac of the Dead* as “the war that had never ended, the war for the land” between tribal peoples and the nation-state.²⁷ In response to the threat in the novel of a U.S. military invasion of Mexico, La Escapia, the commander of the pan-American tribal army in Mexico, “wants U.S. troops to understand they are fighting an Indian war” to protect U.S. interests in Mexico—not just a war against communism or drugs.²⁸

Calabazas echoes Silko’s views and links the rejection of borders to other structures imposed by white society that are developed in the novel:

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 and 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.²⁹

Imaginary laws and time point to other structures that are examined in the novel, realities that exist in the white but not the tribal mind, but which participate in the struggle for control that is ultimately the struggle over the land. Like the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which “guaranteed protection for all land titles granted prior to the arrival of the U.S.” but “had been violated again and again by whites greedy for the land,” the other constructs were also introduced in under the deceptive guise of a desire to protect tribal people, though they in fact threatened their culture and existence.³⁰ The government is outside the law and beyond the control of its citizens.

Silko exposes the destructive nature of religion, law, education, medicine, and so-called civilized society, showing how they can be motivated by self-destructive greed and manipulated to destroy the tribal connection with land, spiritual power, and story. These latter realities are inseparable. Words, spirits, land, people, and stories are simple, but their meanings are difficult, if not impossible, to capture in English. Such concepts’ meanings derive from indigenous cultures rather than European concepts and do not identify autonomous categories. The various territories identified by boundaries imposed by Euro-America are related to the attempts to dispossess tribal people of their connections with land and power.

Calabazas’ story of Geronimo demonstrates how every aspect of society contributes to the oppression of tribal people as part of a concerted effort to control them. The Geronimo wars are about the Native people’s refusal to surrender their freedom on the land. The spirits make it impossible for troops to capture and subdue the symbolic leader, partly because Geronimo is not a particular outlaw but the people themselves. “The face in all the photographs [of Geronimo] had belonged to an ancestor, the soul of one long dead who knew the plight of the ‘Geronimos.’”³¹ Old Pancakes, who surrenders, claiming he is

Geronimo, "had finally been able to use his skills as a liar and joker to seize the opportunity to save the others."³² The political requirements for victory and the newspapers' dependence on dramatic headlines make it impossible to acknowledge that the real Geronimo had not been captured. The education system is used to support the destruction of the children of Geronimo's people who are taken to a school for Indians in Pennsylvania where "many of the Apache children fell ill and died."³³ The wars against Geronimo continue by using schools as weapons. The ironies in the story provide the characteristic humor underlying the whole novel, but do not obscure the theme that, like territorial borders, other systems operated by the state and the church—law, the army, politics, the media, and education—all interact to support of the genocidal war against the the tribes.

The war takes many forms but has been going on since contact: "Even then, when the heart of every Yaqui was crying out, no Yaqui ever said 'surrender.' It was the same war they had been fighting for more than four hundred years."³⁴ There is no surrender, no end to the war so far.

The church throws its support behind the normalization of the geographical borders when "suddenly white priests had announced smuggling as a mortal sin because smuggling was stealing from the government," even though the people had freely traveled north and south for thousands of years. Zeta laughs out loud at this, but identifies the fundamental irony—it is impossible to steal from a government that is the worst thief:

There was not, and there never has been, a legal government by Europeans anywhere in the Americas. Not by any definition, not even by the Europeans' own definition and laws. Because no legal government could be established on stolen land. Because stolen land never had clear title.³⁵

Consequently borders are based on might alone, not legitimacy: "War had been declared the first day the Spaniards set foot on Native soil, and the same war had been going on ever since; the war was for the continents called the Americas."³⁶ All the institutional structures Europeans brought with them and established in America support that war to dispossess Native peoples of land and power.

The power Euro-Americans use to protect those institutions is limited and is seriously challenged by the spirituality of the Native peoples whose power is connected to the land and the spirits, not just to institutions. As a result, the missionaries are described as the worst enemies because "they warned people not to talk or to listen to spirit beings."³⁷ The novel repeats the theme presented in Calabazas' dream of the ancestors that "the World the whites brought with them would not last" in America,³⁸ in the chauffeur (and trickster) Tacho's words,³⁹ in the powerful revolutionary El Feo's arguments,⁴⁰ and in the sacred stories that express the power of history based on justice: "History would catch up with the white man whether the Indians did anything or not. History was the sacred text. The most complete history was the most powerful force."⁴¹

Revolutionary ideologies are also dismissed. European communism is rejected because it, too, had been "dirtied with the blood of millions."⁴² Cuban Marxism, represented by Bartolomeo who is executed by the tribal revolutionaries in Mexico, is rejected because it has no respect for tribal power.⁴³ Even Karl Marx, whose ideas are explained with insight and sympathy by Angelita, is finally rejected with the crucial argument that "Poor Marx did not understand that the power of the stories belonged to the spirits of the dead."⁴⁴ As Tamara Teale observes in her discussion of Marxism in the novel, "capitalism and Marxism . . . both conflict with the Native American lifeway that holds the earth sacred."⁴⁵ The profound significance of the difference between the Native and the Euro-American ideologies of power is examined in great detail in Silko's novel based on the teachings and experiences of Native peoples themselves.

Recognizing differences is crucial to survival, as Calabazas takes time to explain to Root and Mosca. He stops their journey because Root remarked "that he thought one dull gray boulder looked identical to another dull gray boulder a few hundred yards back."⁴⁶ Calabazas teaches them to see the difference because "survival had depended on differences."⁴⁷ The novel is largely concerned with identifying these differences in order to protect the people of the earth against the destruction of being absorbed into sameness. These distinctions are not separated by artificially constructed borders, but exist as a result of the nature of creation, what exists in the world as opposed to what exists only in the mind.

ALTERNATIVES

Silko's story of oppression, as is characteristic of other Native authors, is still an understatement about the real situations that she describes. Words can never express it all, including both the pain and the optimism that are present in the actual experiences of the indigenous peoples in the Americas since the arrival of the Europeans. At the same time, the story is based on vision and provides a compelling interpretation of historical events. And finally, this novel, like much of the literature by indigenous authors around the world, is not written primarily to criticize European society, but to provide solutions for the oppression of colonialism.

The events in the novel take place in the past, present, and future, and in imaginary time—Indian time. The conditions Silko writes about are not limited by Western ideas of time and place. The underlying humor in the novel, derived from the trickster tradition, depends on the recognition that the destructive forces that threatened Native peoples both before and after the arrival of the Europeans, though greatly accentuated by the arrival, also strengthened the tribal people to resist those forces. These forces, identified as sorcery, will ultimately self-destruct because of the natural course of history based on justice and spiritual power. All human beings, as the novel implies, are responsible for choosing between destruction and creation. Geographical borders, their supporting institutions and ideologies, and individual greed are rejected as genocidal and suicidal. They support the illegitimate existence of

the nation-state, held together by the glue of money, in opposition to people and their just claims to the land and spiritual sources of power and survival. Just as money is the power fueling destruction, land is the key to tribal identity, as La Escapia argues in the novel: "They agreed only on one point; they must retake their land despite the costs."⁴⁸

The assertion of the crucial significance of story is based on Native peoples' rights to tell and create their own history. Silko and other Native authors such as Arthur Solomon in the poem, "The End of the Empire,"⁴⁹ optimistically announce the inevitability of victory. One cannot argue meaningfully against the demands for justice and the critique of the illegitimacy of the continuing oppressive colonization of indigenous peoples.

Silko's views are reinforced by the discussions taking place in various fields. Nikki van der Gaag, critiquing the ideology of the state from a European perspective, argues that the nation-state, with its supposedly protective borders, is on its last legs: "Governments and those who run them are increasingly seen as useless, corrupt—or just very distant."⁵⁰ The article identifies two positive alternatives to "global supranational capitalism or total fragmentation": a non-capitalistic world that will be either largely supranational or else "based on small ethnic groupings."⁵¹ Silko's novel combines these two directions to project a supranational world guided by the teachings and wisdom of tribal society. Jamake Highwater, an American historian of North American tribal peoples, explores the possibility of developing a new society based on tribal wisdom; his ideas about tribal identity support Silko's views:

The image that grows out of the depiction of tribal identity is a startling form of individualism unknown in the West except within the underground of artists and various social and sexual deviants. For the abiding principle of tribalism is the vision of both nature and society which provides a place for absolutely everything and everyone.⁵²

The essence of this identity is vision, equivalent to Silko's concepts of the teachings of spiritual ancestors and story.

At the end of the novel, Sterling, who was alienated and exiled from his tribal community as a complex result of colonial processes, returns successfully because he understands the vision:

Sterling didn't care about the rumors and gossip because 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.⁵³

The snake that appears as a geographical site at the beginning of the novel holds a message for the people: they need to unite across borders in order to survive. The views about power relations in the Americas that Silko expresses are also expressed by aboriginal peoples today. On 8 September 2000, *The Sault Star* highlighted a statement made by Assembly of First Nations Grand Chief Matthew Coon Come to a conference marking 150 years since the sign-

ing of the Robinson Huron Treaty.⁵⁴ The front page headline, "Treaties illustrate right to self determination, AFN grand chief asserts," was followed by a quotation in bold letters: "**If the treaty allowing Europeans to exist on this land is no longer valid, then their right to live here is no longer valid.**" Silko's novel also explores the theme that Native peoples of the Americas have the power to exercise their rights as sovereign nations if they unite across the colonial borders that fragment and oppress them.

The novel is not at all "tragic" as the quotation from *The New York Times Book Review* on the book's back cover asserts. It is instead the articulation of a vision of hope that Maxine Hong Kingston alludes to on the front cover: "To read this book is to hear the voices of the ancestors, and spirits telling us where we come from, who we are, and where we must go." Janet St. Clair also identifies the relationship between hope and spirituality in the novel: "And yet, although scourged and blighted, hope remains alive. But the prophecies in the Almanac are explicit . . . ; a renewed era of active spiritual and social community in the Americas will prevail."⁵⁵

The interpretation of the vision excludes borders and boundaries and nation-states that destroy the people and the land to which they belong. Even the worst possibility, as Sterling recognizes at the end of the novel, would still protect the earth and the indestructibility of the sacred: "Burned and radioactive, with all humans dead, the earth would still be sacred. Man was too insignificant to desecrate her."⁵⁶ This alternative to the Western idea of human supremacy in the order of creation emphasizes the importance of harmony with the earth, as opposed to the driving need to control nature and human society, represented by the ideology of nation-states and their protective borders. The novel argues that the land will be returned to its people. If this happens, the earth will still remain supreme, and harmony will prevail.

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NOTES

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30. *Ibid.*, 237.

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32. *Ibid.*, 230.

33. *Ibid.*, 234.

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*, 133.

36. *Ibid.*

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40. Ibid., 513–14.
41. Ibid., 316.
42. Ibid., 291.
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55. Janet St. Clair, “Death of Love,” 8.
56. Silko, *Almanac*, 72.