“Anti-imperial Translation”: Silko, Freud, and the Voicing of Disavowed Histories

MADSEN, Deborah Lea

Abstract

In a 1992 interview with Linda Niemann, Silko describes how she overcame a writing block by setting aside her manuscript of Almanac of the Dead in order to read Sigmund Freud. She begins by likening the writing process to psychoanalysis: “It's like do-it-yourself psychoanalysis. It's sort of dangerous to be a novelist. I really learned it with this one – you're working with language and all kinds of things can can escape with the words of a narrative.” Silko then moves abruptly from the issue of the generative power of language to evoke the figure of Freud: “… About two-thirds of the way through, I just finally had to stop and read Freud, and I read all eighteen volumes, one right after the other” (Arnold, ed. 2000, p. 109). In this essay, I explore the role of Freudian theories of language in Almanac of the Dead in connection with Silko's heteroglossic narrative style and, in particular, the role of the narrative voice as a means of translating an indigenous epistemology into the conventions of English-language literature. Central to my concerns is Freud's late work, especially Moses and Monotheism (1939), [..]

Reference


Available at:
http://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:87485

Disclaimer: layout of this document may differ from the published version.
While most critical analyses of *Almanac of the Dead* remark at some point on the novel's heteroglossic, multivocal qualities arising, in part, from Silko's multitudinous cast of characters, the character that most dominates every reading of the narrative has been relatively neglected: the narrator. Indeed, I want to suggest that a way of interpreting Silko's claim that in the novel she was “trying to give history a character” is to think of the anonymous third-person narrator as precisely that character: a sustained, and sometimes disruptive, presence in the novel that translates the voice and historical vision of the ancestors (in Neimann, 108). This work of translation is much more than semantic conversion or decoding between languages (though this is part of Lecha's work with the ancient notebooks); translation in this context is the kind of postcolonial philosophical exchange described by Arnold Krupat's elegant term: “anti-imperial translation” (170). Krupat formulates this phrase in the context of his discussion of the anti-colonial dynamic that characterizes “tensions and differences from 'the imperial center'” (170) in contemporary Native American literature, as these texts engage in the complex process of translating indigenous world-views into the language of English literary convention. Translation, in this sense, references for Krupat “the ways in which any particular Native American literary text interpellates any of a number of indigenous perspectives and language usages in such a way as to make the text's 'Indian' language constitute a translation, one in which the 'English' on the page does indeed 'foreground the tension,' and 'emphasize the differences' between 'Indian' and 'English’” (173). He goes on to suggest, in the same essay, succinctly but with great insight, how Silko's south-north orientation in *Almanac* subverts the east-west/past-present axes underpinning the settler ideology of manifest destiny, to inflect and recolonize “the 'English' of the novel with her 'Indian’” (175).

Compelling as it is, Krupat's insight can be pushed further to encompass the distinctive stylistic dimensions of Silko's epic historical narrative and, specifically, the work of her narrator. I want to argue that in *Almanac* Silko is engaged in a process of “anti-imperial translation” that deconstructs the exceptionalist settler-colonial history of the Americas while simultaneously testifying to the “disavowed” history of indigenous peoples. The narrator translates the voice of the ancestors in a dialectical process that at once exposes the hegemonic narratives of “discovery,” “contact,” and “expansion through progress” as the repressed primal history of violence in the Americas while, at the same time, witnessing “the 500 year war that never ended” and the beginning of the fulfillment of a history encoded in the ancient almanacs. More than the revision of received interpretations of historical events, more than the simple decoding of prophecy, this process requires the performative translation of historical meanings across fundamentally antagonistic epistemologies – not just European versus Native, settler versus indigenous, white versus red, brown, and black identity binaries – but the ways of knowing characteristic of the “Destroyers” versus all who would oppose them. I use the word “performing” advisedly because in his discussion of philosophical or epistemological or cross-cultural “anti-imperial translation,” Krupat makes a valuable distinction between meaning as a function of “narrative or song language” and meaning that arises from the “dramatic and performative nature of oral literature” (167, 178 n.20). It is in this performative sense that Silko's narrator translates: by telling the stories of the characters, by mediating the characters' stories, by passing on the stories from the ancient almanac, by transmitting the stories encoded in a vast array of different kinds of texts from Sterling's pulp magazines to Clinton's college notes on Black history. In order to translate the voice of the
ancestors the narrative voice must be at once transcendent and embodied; trans-American, transglobal, and transhistorical, and yet particular. Thus, the narrator performatively tells the stories that the characters are either telling or being told in the diegesis and, through them, voices the disavowed history of the past five hundred years in the Americas while prophesying the changes that have started and those that are yet to come.

Of course, Silko's narrator is not a conventional character that acts in the fictional, diegetic world of the novel; however, the narrator does mediate every detail of that world. The stylistic vehicle of this mediation is a form of free indirect style (or free indirect discourse), that Silko sustains throughout the entire novel. The effects of this stylistic choice are multiple, arising from the ability granted to the narrator to function on several discursive levels simultaneously. Free indirect style creates a multi-perspectival narrative voice, one that is at once both immanent and transcendent, by combining the first-person interiority of the diegetic characters with the exteriority of the omniscient narrator's third-person voice. Throughout Almanac, the voice of the narrator is juxtaposed with and often becomes indistinguishable from that of the character(s). This fusing of the extradiegetic perspective of the narrator with the intradiegetic focalization of the characters produces a complex (sometimes “dizzying,” according to Katherine Sugg, 87) doubling or multiplying of narrative voice(s). In this way, the narrator not only communicates the specific stories, experiences, values, perceptions (in short, the reality) of the characters but also functions as the voice of indigenous history, performing as the main character of the novel.

But the narrator does more than just figure the vision and voice of the ancestors. The performativity of the narrative voice creates a relationship with the reader that, for Silko, is fundamental to her project. In the 1994 interview with Linda Neimann referenced above, Silko explains the power of the stories that are necessary to ensure the continuance of the People: “These stories work on unconscious levels that we don't have control of and access to by direct everyday means. When I was working with these narratives, I wanted them to have an after-effect in the unconscious, and I knew that things are present in some narratives, especially oral narratives, that make them just unforgettable” (107-8). Both the content of the narrator's work (the stories that are told) and also the way in which the narrative work is done (how those stories are told) are designed to shape the reader's reception of the novel on the deepest levels of cognition. Silko's words echo those of Freud in Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego (1922), where he describes how “Our conscious acts are the outcome of an unconscious substratum created in the mind mainly by hereditary influences. This substratum consists of the innumerable common characteristics handed down from generation to generation, which constitute the genius of race. Behind the avowed causes of our acts there undoubtedly lie secret causes that we do not avow, but behind these secret causes there are many others more secret still, of which we ourselves are ignorant. The greater part of our daily actions are the result of hidden motives which escape our observation” (74). Though Freud is a marginal European philosophical presence in comparison to Marx in the novel – Freud is explicitly invoked only occasionally – his account of the traumatic legacy of a disavowed primal history of violence, communicated through stories and neurotic individual and cultural behaviors, illuminates aspects of Silko's narrative practice.

I. Silko, Freud, and the Primal Scene of Violence

In the essay, “Freud, Marx and Chiapas in Leslie Marmon Silko's Almanac of the Dead,” and her subsequent monograph, Literary Trauma: Sadism, Memory, and Sexual Violence in American Women's Fiction, Deborah Horvitz explores the role of unconscious communication in relation to Freud's theory of traumatic repetition, reminding us how “Almanac suggests that the textual process of decoding its narrative parallels that of untangling the disguised content of the unconscious, for the actual manifestation of each code is the same. That is, both appear through dreams, symbols,
stories, and repetitive, frequently surreal, imagery” (1998, 49). Indeed, the work of one of the narrative's more important inscribed readers is explicitly likened by the narrator to psychoanalysis: “Lecha proceeded with the woman [the TV producer's vengeful girlfriend] in ways that closely resembled the work of a psychoanalyst or counselor” (143). Lecha records all the woman's memories of her former lover, searching for patterns in the details; later, Seese recalls Lecha asking “Had Seese heard about Freudian theory? ... Freud had interpreted fragments – images from hallucinations, fantasies, and dreams – in terms patients could understand. The images were messages from the patient to herself or himself” (A 173). In the course of the narrative, Lecha and Seese interpret the fragments that are Yoeme's notebooks on the ancient almanacs; as I will argue, these characters train the external reader in the interpretation of Almanac's “hallucinations, fantasies, and dreams” as well as the fragments of stories with which the narrator presents us. Here, I want to suggest that through Lecha the narrator invokes Freud's distinction between the “manifest” or obvious meaning of imagistic messages and the “latent” or unconscious meaning that is encoded in imagery that is always polyvalent. The narrative presents us with repeated clusters of images that represent potential patterns of meaning; these repeated images exist not in relations of sameness but co-exist as part of a pattern that, in the fictional world, may expose the unconscious anxieties of the characters and, in the dimension of the narrator's telling of the story, speak to a deep legacy of trauma.

This is not to claim that Silko and Freud think identically about the symbolic significance of repetition and Horvitz makes this clear: “Undoubtedly and emphatically, Silko is calling attention to the concept of repetition. First, she actually repeats, almost word for word, identical images; then she highlights, in both passages, the enormous power residing within the retelling and the repetition of the stories” (50). In contrast, in Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920) Freud describes the compulsion to repeat as a defense mechanism, a form of avoidance which, as Freud explains, substitutes the delusory “sovereignty of the inner psychical reality” for “the reality of the outer world” and then “the way to insanity is open” (123). Almanac insists that the stories are alive; that the people will survive so long as the stories are kept alive through repeated tellings. Horvitz argues that repetition without stories or the history they create is symptomatic of the behavior of the Destroyers, citing Serlo's reflection on the repetition of violence perpetrated by the Israeli descendants of Holocaust survivors on Palestinians (A 546): “the Destroyers … have repressed all histories, stories, memories from their ancestors and, as a result, have absolutely no link to their pasts” (51). However, we might also recall Mosca's claim that “[e]ach time a Palestinian child was shot by Israeli soldiers, Hitler smiled” (A 212) or Calabazas' assertion that “Hitler got all he knew from the Spanish and Portuguese invaders” (A 216) or Lecha's memory of the images that Yoeme had shown when she and Zeta were children, “wood-block prints of churchmen ... breaking Jews on the wheel” (A 717). In the similarity of these repeated thoughts expressed by distinct characters we are presented by the narrator with a genealogy of violence that reaches back five hundred years.

The legacy of violence extends even further back in chronological time. Sterling remembers the stories told by Aunt Marie of the Inquisition and also of Montezuma, “the biggest sorcerer of them all”; he reflects, “No wonder Cortés and Montezuma had hit it off so well together when they met; both had been members of the same secret clan” (A 761). Tacho concludes his explanation to Menardo of sorcerers and their misuse of the power of blood with his observation that “God the Father himself had accepted only Jesus as a worthy sacrifice” (A 337) and Mosca evokes the bloodshed of the Crusades to explain the alienation of Christians and Muslims from God (A 611). The community of Destroyers includes European Christians who, Tacho remarks in terms that will be echoed by Yoeme's description of the Christian Church as “a cannibal monster” (718), eat Jesus' “flesh and blood again and again” at Mass (A 475) and the Destroyers also include the indigenous priest described in the old notebooks making a human sacrifice, blood congealing on the altar like “the rind of a fragrant fruit” (A 593). The metaphor of fruit is evocative of the repeated image of “strange fruit” that recurs throughout the narrative, again linking the Destroyers' acts of violence
into a sustained historical legacy. It seems to me that the problem with Destroyers like Beaufrey, Serlo, Judge Arne, Max Blue, and others is not that they are isolated from their ancestors and “have absolutely no link with their pasts” (Horvitz 51) but that they are very much connected to ancestors who themselves were/are Destroyers. This is one of the profound ironies that emerge from the narrator's multiplied perspective. While an individual character such as El Feo may in the course of his daydreaming consider that “In the Americas the white man never referred to the past but only to the future. The white man didn't seem to understand he had no future here because he had no past, no spirits of ancestors here” (A 313), this belief is in tension with the network of utterances from other characters that are held together in the discourse of the omniscient narrator.

Clearly, as Horvitz so cogently argues, repetition is very important to the narrative project of Almanac but something else is going on as well. Lecha's memory of Yoeme's image of the Church as “a cannibal monster” suggests something of this. Lecha begins her recollection by describing Yoeme's action; she then uses free direct speech to report (but not quote) Yoeme's words – “Yoeme said the mask had slipped at that time, and all over Europe, ordinary people had understood in their hearts the 'Mother Church' was a cannibal monster” (A 717-8) – but as Yoeme's sentence ends and the next begins, it is impossible to determine whether the speaker remains Leche reporting Yoeme or the narrator assuming again control of the narration. Here, as so often in Almanac, free indirect style works to put into irresolvable question the “ownership” of words, thus attributing a powerful multivocality to those words. And the words that follow are very significant: “Since the Europeans had no other gods or beliefs left, they had to continue the Church rituals and worship; but they knew the truth” (718). The narrator, perhaps through Lecha reporting Yoeme's words, is suggesting that the motive for the ongoing power of the “cannibal monster” is the unconscious process of disavowal. Like obsessive repetition, disavowal is a mechanism of avoidance: refusing traumatic knowledge, behaving as if it were not true, even though its repressed truth is unconsciously acknowledged.

In my reading, disavowal is central to Silko's narrative project in Almanac as she charts the disavowed history of settler-colonial genocide in the Americas. In this respect, the most relevant of Freud's writings on disavowal is his final work, Moses and Monotheism, begun in 1934 and completed after he fled Nazi-occupied Vienna in 1938. This radically discontinuous, sometimes contradictory, text resonates with Silko's novel through Freud's reflections on exile (his reluctant move to London), murderous racial hatred (anti-Semitism), and the transmission of guilt as the motive for cultural practices such as organized religion and Judaism in particular. His theorizing is based on the fundamental analogy he proposes between the neurotic behavior of the individual and that of communities, the idea that “in the history of the human species something happened similar to the events in the life of an individual. That is to say, mankind as a whole also passed through the conflicts of a sexual-aggressive nature, which left permanent traces but which were for the most part warded off and forgotten; later, after a long period of latency, they came to life again and created phenomena similar in structure and tendency to the neurotic symptoms” (129). There are several points to note here besides the proposal that the psychic life of the individual can be understood as homologous with that of “the human species”: specifically, the structural importance of primal acts of violence, the disavowal of this violence, and the “permanent traces” that will not remain repressed but return in the form of neurotic symptoms.

In his metapsychological history of monotheism, these “traces” are the imperfectly repressed, disavowed, memories of the primal parricide that are transmitted inter-generationally to individuals and communities through inherited traditions. Freud proposes that the Judaic or Mosaic religion originated in Egypt under the reign of Akhenaten; after the reintroduction of polytheism following the Pharaoh's death Moses chose exile among one of the communities on Egypt's imperial borders (the origin for Freud of “the chosen people”) where he imposed his monotheistic religion. Rising up against his authoritarian rule, the people assassinated him in an act that was collectively forgotten as the community merged with another and embraced their worship of the volcano god
Jahve/Yahweh. Later, a second Moses emerged as a leader of a cult that brought together elements of the two religions into a synthesis. However, repressed collective memories of the original killing of Moses, and the guilt arising from these memories, endure in what Freud calls “memory-traces in our archaic inheritance.” Concluding his historical speculations he asserts, “I have no qualms in saying that men have always known in this particular way that once upon a time they had a primaeval[sic] father and killed him” (161). Repressed guilt then motivates religious practices that symbolically or latently acknowledge but manifestly avoid knowledge of the primal parricide; Freud interprets the sacrifice of Jesus in these terms, as symbolic restitution for or expiation of what becomes the Christian notion of “original sin.” Indeed, the Christianity founded by Paul of Tarsus is, in Freud's account, structured around the symbolic repetition of the murder of Moses; “the supposed judicial murder of Christ” (162) was an event of sufficient power to awaken the memory-trace, to cause its shift from the unconscious to consciousness though in an altered form.

Turning to Silko's novel, of course there is no single primal act of violence represented in the narrative that is comparable to the killing of Moses. Rather, there are many scenes and images that evoke a long history of violence in the Americas, a history disavowed by narratives of “discovery” and manifest destiny in which Christianity is deeply complicit: Lecha links the sacrifice of Jesus to the Jewish Holocaust (A 174); Menardo's grandfather links the biblical story of exile from Eden to the settlers’ “abandonment of the land where they had been born” (A 258); in the context of the anti-colonial struggle to take back the land, Tacho echoes Yoeme's image of the cannibalistic Church by reflecting, “Typical of sorcerers or Destroyers, the Christians had denied they were cannibals and sacrificers” (A 475) – a phrase that anticipates the Notebook's allusion to Aztec human sacrifice (A 594) and Beaufrey's fascination with the cannibal Albert Fish, a descendant of Mayflower settlers (A 533). Mosca links the betrayal realized in the crucifixion to the ongoing betrayal of “Jesus' creed of forgiveness and brotherly love” symbolized by the Church's display of wealth and later asks, “What did the Church want? Was it different from what the generals wanted, or from what the rich wanted from the poor and the Indians?” (A 623); and, late in the narrative, Lecha explains how she overcame her resistance to Yoeme's view of the Catholic Church as “a dead thing, even before the Spanish ships had arrived in the Americas” (717) by understanding the deep psychic motives of settlers who substitute the compensatory act of killing for acknowledgement of “the loss [of] their connection with the earth” (A 718). The link between the violence of colonial settlement, the long history of the Destroyers' cannibalistic pleasure in death and destruction, and five hundred years of indigenous resistance to genocide in the Americas constitutes a history of “acting-out” that is disavowed by settler narratives in what Silko has called “one of the tragedies of the United States – a sort of collective amnesia about the past, sort of like the Germans during the Jewish Holocaust” (in Perry, 321). This disavowal, and the bloody history that it attempts to repress, is witnessed by the omniscient narrator of Almanac and the manifold stories to which the narrative testifies.

II. Narrative Voice: Structure and Style

Towards the end of Moses and Monotheism Freud reflects on his growing confidence, since the publication of Totem and Taboo (1912), “that religious phenomena are to be understood only on the model of the neurotic symptoms of the individual, which are so familiar to us, as a return of long forgotten important happenings in the primaeval [sic] history of the human family, that they owe their obsessive character to that very origin and therefore derive their effect on mankind from the historical truth they contain” (94). Here, Freud suggests that the symptoms originating in a history of repressed violence have as their latent meaning the “historical truth” of that disavowed violence. But this raises the question: how is this archaic inheritance transmitted from generation to generation and what forms do these symptoms take? Freud's answer is formulated as “memory
traces,” memories that undergo repression and so become disconnected from other intellectual processes and “inaccessible to consciousness” (152). These traumatic memories cannot be simply told in manifest terms because consciousness would have (and has already) refused them. Only by speaking to the language of the unconscious – in dreams, “slips,” visions – can the memory traces of traumatic events be revealed and the disavowed history exposed by these traces be mapped out.

It is this activity in which the omniscient third-person narrator is engaged and out of which, I argue, the narrative voice assumes the dimensions of a character that is intra-textual while remaining extradiegetic. That is, the narrator is not an agent in the novel's story-world but is the dominating presence of the narrative as it is told. In an interview with Thomas Irmer, Silko admits that the novel was originally submitted to her editor as a single unbroken block of text. Indeed, it is possible to read Almanac as an extended stream-of-consciousness located within the discursive space of the narrator.

The links among the many sections that Silko created in response to her editor's dismay are primarily implied, arising from imagistic or thematic continuities among the chapters. In important respects, the structure consists of the narrator telling the stories that characters are telling about stories and the organization of these stories is captured self-consciously by the narrative's repeated image of the red-tailed hawk. While thinking about the stories he has heard told about the Apaches of Arizona, Calabazas recalls one story told by Mahawala and the old ones that “did not run in a line for the horizon but circled and spiraled instead like a red-tailed hawk” (A 224). This image captures the recursive sequential structure of Almanac but when it is applied to Lecha's work with Yoeme's notebooks it suggests more of the novel's free-associational and subjective quality. Reaching for the old manuscript, Lecha likens the feeling she has after taking her medication to “feeling as thin as an air current a hawk might ride. … she could imagine the gliding and soaring of the red-tailed hawks that often flew near the ranch house” (245). If the parts, books, chapters, and words on the page circle and spiral, then the flow of symbolic latent meaning that Lecha is engaged in transcribing from the eponymous almanac is like an air current, buoyant yet unpredictable.

It is from the interplay of these dimensions of Almanac – the manifest organizational form and the latent conceptual structure – that the character of the narrator develops. David Moore has argued that the structure of the novel remains “open to the historical moment,” through the juxtaposition of chapters and the refusal to close narrative gaps or ultimately to resolve the plot (2001, 164). While this is undoubtedly true, I would add that these are features of Silko's strategy aimed at constructing an active narrative voice that develops the figure of the narrator into a character in the text. The distinct quality of this narrator is suggested by Brewster Fitz who, in his account of Silko's characteristic creation of the “writing storyteller,” in the figure of an anonymous third-person narrator of free indirect style, recalls that “[i]n interviews ... Silko has implicitly linked this third-person narrator with a spiritual narrator and with the voices of many spirits for whom she is the scribe” (2004, 8). In his earlier essay, “Coyote Loops,” Fitz offers an extended description of Silko's style and resulting suspension of the distinction between subjective and objective perspectives in her fiction. He addresses her use of “a special version of the indirect free style discourse [sic] in which the third person narrator gives not only the protagonist's perceptions but also his interpretation of the 'supposed objective account' of his experience given by others. This potentially puts into question the objectivity of all third person storytellers in the story, including the third person narrator, and in so doing, gives rise to a gap in Silko's discourse ...” (2002, 76-77).

Of course, objective and rational descriptions of perceptions and experiences do not permit access to repressed and disavowed knowledge: the priority of Silko's narrator in Almanac. However, on the level of specific narrative incidents, this free indirect style generates profound ambiguity by refusing to attribute explicitly “ownership” of words and thoughts to an objective speaking or thinking agent. Sometimes this ambiguity allows the narrator to express a self-conscious irony: when reporting Awa Gee's obsession with secrecy (A 684) while telling all his secrets; or in the exchange between Menardo and Alegria about the risks associated with their affair. The narration
moves from Alegria's quoted speech to the narrator's description of Menardo's response, to what may be the narrator's paraphrase of Alegria's words but equally may be Menardo's further response to her: “She had refused to discuss it further. It was upsetting her” (A 286). This same ambiguity attaches to the attribution of the following sentence – “There was no need to talk because nothing was going to happen” – which, again, produces a self-conscious irony because, of course, the narrator does “talk” and many things are “going to happen.” Not only does the narrator acquire qualities associated with a novelistic character (a capacity for self-irony) but such moments locate the narrator in the discursive space of the ancestors, a space that is embedded in the particularities of the fictional world while transcending that world.

The trans/historical location of the narrator is underlined by rare but dramatic narrative ellipses in which the thematic linkages that usually bridge chapters are notably absent. A relatively simple example that highlights the contribution of this technique to the characterization of the narrator occurs in Part Five, Book One. Mosca's thoughts about treachery and betrayal (A 611) bring to an end the chapter “Tucson, City of Thieves” and the series of four chapters focalized through him; in the following chapter the narrative moves abruptly to Seese's cab ride to Miracle Mile (A 612) where she plans to sell her kilo of cocaine to Tiny. In a linear, sequential reading this shift of focus between chapters is rudely abrupt. The link between them, however, is apparent in a second or retroactive reading that aligns the reader with the knowledge of the narrative's future events – events that are already known to the narrator. Seese is going to be set up and betrayed by Tiny; Jamey will fall victim to the treachery of his police colleagues. What this ellipsis does is to emphasize the omniscience of the narrator as a storyteller for whom time in the diegetic world is experienced in the manner described by the ancestors. For the narrator, there is no past and future only a present that encompasses all time.

III. Narrating the Language of the Ancestors

It is from the historical perspective of the ancestors that the narrator presents the symbolic language of the unconscious. The narrative's complex system of images, repeated in the discourse of distinct characters, converge in the voice of the narrator. The privilege attached to this narrative voice derives from its work of translating the voice of the ancestor spirits. Mosca, reflecting that the spirit voice lodged in his shoulder does not say much, concludes that the spirits have the power to “put the idea in your head out of the blue” (A 627). This is precisely what the translating narrative voice does: through the cumulative pattern of images, the narrator is able to put into the reader's head – seemingly “out of the blue” – an idea that has, in fact, been contextualized by earlier repetitions. These images connect to form networks of meaning that exceed the capacities of individual characters, exposing the disavowed history of violence that is their latent meaning. The recursive flower imagery, for example, is grounded in the fragment from the ancient notebooks that reads: “The land of the dead is a land of flowers” (A 572). Just some of the instances that link flowers with death include Menardo's perception of the purple blossoms climbing the mortuary walls as resembling nothing so much as human intestines (A 334), which recalls Seese's misrecognition of the photographs of Eric's corpse “nearly buried in blossoms of bright reds and purples” (A 106); Seese's nightmare of yellow roses (A 52) during her drugged sleep following the abortion resonates later with the image of yellow blossoming trees on Serlo's finca to locate transhistorically the space occupied by Serlo and Beaufrey as a place of death akin to the almanac's “land of the dead.”

If the novel's flower imagery works, in part, to look back to the past to relate the Destroyers Serlo and Beaufrey to a long legacy of violence, the network of images associated with fountains and pools of water enables the narrator to predict the future. In Seese's first encounter with Lecha, she watches her television performance as Lecha recounts the dead babies and children found each day in Mexico City, “not counting the ones found floating facedown among the water lilies in
fountains outside the presidential palace” (A 47), a performance that causes Seese to dream that “she finds Monte's corpse in a fountain at a shopping mall” (A 47). Later, from Lecha's perspective, the free-associative process of identifying, sifting, and organizing clues is dramatized in the television appearance where she predicts that the severed heads of the US ambassador to Mexico and his chief aide will be found floating among the water lilies on the canals of Xochimilco (A 164); it is in the very different context of one of El Grupo's social meetings that Menardo is worried by the news that “more severed human heads had been found floating among the flowers of Xochimilco” (A 329). The same image of water lilies characterizes the fountain Calabazas passes as he makes his way to the monsignor's apartment where he discovers his adulterous wife (A 243) and Menardo, following the death of Iliana, is left with his marble mansion, “his pool of water lily blossoms” (A 472), and his adulterous second wife. The pools filled with water lilies are associated with betrayal and violent death but, at the end of the narrative, Leah Blue looks over the desert and in her imagination recreates the landscape as an image of her future real estate development: “sleek, low villas of pale marble with red bougainvilleas and even water lilies for the floating gardens in the canals” (A 750). Her vision of Venice, Arizona incorporates multiple images of death and, to heighten the irony, the narrator reports Leah's perception of the changing colors of the sunset reflected off the clouds – “silvers and golds becoming chrome-yellow, fire-orange, fire-red, fire-purple” (A 752) – colors reminiscent of the reds and purples that characterize David's photographs of Eric's corpse; colors that evoke the power of the fire macaws. Leah reassures herself that her vision of the future will make her rich, and the manifest meaning of the scene she conjures suggests that she is correct, but the latent meaning of the narrator's discourse allows a glimpse into a future of betrayal, chaos, and violent death for Leah Blue.

Interconnections among the images that inflect Leah's vision with such profound irony are presented cross-textually and converge in the narrator's perspective, which is at once immanent and transcendent. At significant points in Almanac, the narrative highlights the importance of this perspective by combining the power of imagistic repetition with narrative ellipsis. The problem that initially dominates the novel is Seese's search for her missing son, which is postponed by Lecha's promise that when the transcription of Yoeme's notebooks is complete she will find Seese's son. The disturbing effects of working with Lecha on the almanac fragments, in the chapter “Shallow Graves,” focuses on the traumatic stories Seese witnesses as she sorts Lecha's mail but, after reading “a dozen or so plea letters,” she encounters something that gives both her and the narrator pause: “she read the letter that stopped her. Without a greeting, a date, a return address, a big manilla envelope had come registered and certified first class” (A 173). The narrator does not reveal the contents of the envelope and the ellipsis is sustained until the end of Part Four, when Serlo hands David “an eight-by-ten manila envelope” (A 563) containing photographs of Monte's autopsied body. The latent meaning of the envelopes is reinforced by the resistance of both Seese and David to identify the images in the photographs as Monte because, to them both, the child in the pictures is too old. The parallel is underlined by the passage from the notebooks that Seese has just transcribed, in which the description of human sacrifice by disembowelment is suggestive of an autopsy and so alludes to Monte's fate at Beaufrey's hands. Lecha has found Monte not by locating his body but by teaching Seese how to read the language of dreams through her work with the ancient almanac.

The most dramatic intersection of ellipsis and recursive imagery concerns Sterling, the character described by Silko as the “moral center” of the narrative (in Perry, 330). The circular form of Almanac starts and ends with Sterling, who is the subject of the narrative frame controlled by the narrator. Very early in the novel the narrator claims that Sterling is “in training for a special assignment” (A 20) but the nature of that assignment is not clarified until the very end. His tasks as gardener on the ranch include cleaning the swimming pool and running errands with Seese in Tucson but these hardly require “training.” Like Seese, his special assignment is to learn to read, to hear the voices of the ancestors and, ultimately, to learn the true meaning of the sacred stone snake's
return to Laguna: he “had not believed the old prophecy ... but he had seen what was happening in Tucson with his own eyes” (A 755). From an avid reader of pulp magazines, Sterling comes to know that the images in his magazines never existed except as simulacra (A 757), as he develops into the novel's central reader of spirit messages. Back at Laguna, Sterling thinks about the slow return of the buffalo and, as he watches the ants, he knows the ants as spiritual messengers (A 758). He remembers the old story about the Destroyers differently now because, as the narrator claims, “Tucson had changed Sterling” (A 762). And, although he tries to forget “everything Lecha had told him,” to disavow his experience and believe that “Tucson had only been a bad dream” (A 762), finally his perspective is that of the stone snake: “he knew what the snake's message was to the people” (A 763).

IV. Conclusion: The Dynamics of Dis/avowal

Throughout *Almanac*, the repetition of narrative images produces a transcendent narratorial ontology that is the vehicle for the latent spirit of the stories. Performatively, the narrator translates the imagistic language of the ancestors speaking through the almanac, through dream imagery that contextualizes and extends the almanac's fragments. “The ancestors' spirits speak in dreams,” Angelita tells the people (A 518) and here to underline the accuracy of her words the narrator refrains from paraphrase, quoting Angelita's exact phrasing. The reality of this dream language is emphasized by Freud; in his 1922 essay *Dreams and Telepathy* he insists that “[t]he psychoanalytic interpretation of dreams ... does away with [the] difference between the dream and event, and gives both the same content” (A 206). In *Almanac*, the reality of the ancestors’ dream speech, the identity of dream and event, converges in the narrator's repetition of phrases and images that belong to the verbal and experiential registers of distinct characters. Thus, repetition adds a transcendent dimension to these images, generalizing their significance beyond the subjective and individual, through the work of the translating narrator.

“The malaise in *Almanac* represents (in terms of psychoanalysis) a return of the North American repressed: the reality of violent conquest,” Ann Stanford notes. She continues, “Carefully constructed historical narratives have attempted to erase the brutality of this conquest. The violent roots of our national origins are, however, the palimpsest that will not be erased and that continually disrupts our notions of bedrock decency and democracy. The text suggests that the insanity and corruption represented in *Almanac* are simply the natural outcomes of two centuries of living with the psychic chasm that lies between the myth and rhetoric of religious/democratic roots and the reality of conquest” (28). Stanford's emphasis on the active erasure of colonial violence is echoed in the suppressed tribal histories of the Americas and Africa that are reinstated by characters like Angelita and Clinton. Angelita ensures that Bartolomeo is tried for crimes against tribal history; Clinton, knowing that “[i]gnorance of the people's history had been the white man's best weapon” (A 742), broadcasts that history in his radio transmissions noting ironically that while the “white man” had control of the radio “he didn't have nothing alive left to say” (A 416). What is important, as Clinton and other characters acknowledge, is what is not said: the disavowed history of genocide and indigenous resistance. However, access to this history is obscured by the “carefully constructed historical narratives” referenced by Stanford that must be unlearned before we can be tutored in the repressed meanings of inherited stories. John Beck captures something of this problematic when he observes that “[t]he real war, as Silko suggests, is not fought by breaking laws that have already been broken but by being able to make the historical connections rendered invisible by the legitimation effects of the nation-state” (265).

As part of the effort to render visible these historical connections *Almanac* incorporates, in addition to fragments from the ancient almanac and notebooks, Angelita's chronology of indigenous rebellion (A 527-30), Wilson Weasel Tail's list of legal injustices (A 714-5), and Clinton's history of
the people's resistance (A 742-6). While these documents manifestly expose the disavowed reality that the US empire rests on stolen land and stolen lives (A 714), factual lists like Angelita's and Clinton's are nuanced by the narrator's continual return to the latent meanings voiced by the ancestors. Through the filter of Mosca's thoughts, for example, the narrator advises, “ancestor spirits had the answers, but you had to be able to interpret messages sent in the language of the spirits.” (A 603). As Kimberly Roppolo explains, “[f]or American Indians ... visual thinking is part of the holistic thinking equation. Personal vision is always conjoined with the knowledge of the People, handed down by one's elders, and it is more than a 'mental' phenomenon – things can be 'known' not only with the mind but also with the heart, body, and spirit” (535). Factual lists speak to the mind; but the heart, body, and spirit are addressed by the ancestors in the poetry that Weasel Tail practices, which “would speak to the dreams and to the spirits, and the people would understand what they must do” (A 713). Through repetition, the narrator insists that dreams will instruct the people how to take back the land and repeatedly the narrator emphasizes the unconscious motives that will cause the people to walk north. The Barefoot Hopi writes to prisoners about the latent, spiritual meanings of their dreams and, according to Mosca, “the Hopi had already infiltrated their dreams with the help of the spirit world” (A 620); Awa Gee's words draw on the recursive imagery of blood as he explains how “[w]hen the time came, the people would sense it; they would feel it in their blood without recognizing what they were about to begin” (A 688). It is Angelita who, reporting at the Holistic Healers Convention on behalf of El Feo and Wacah/Tacho, underlines the importance of interpreting, hearing, knowing, the latent spiritual meanings of the ancestor's messages. She reports to the convention that “Wacah believed that one night the people would all dream the same dream, a dream sent by the spirits of the continent. The dream could not be sent until the people were ready to awaken with new hearts” (A 712).

Located in the trans-historical, trans-textual discursive position that is akin to that of “the spirits of the continent,” the narrator works constantly to translate the characters' stories into this form of knowing from the heart, body, and spirit. Working with each character through free indirect style, the narrator creates and exploits the doubleness of the novel's language to perform discursively the “psychic chasm” (Stanford) that separates histories of disavowal from the reality of conquest. Thus, the narrator shares Zeta's laughter at Greenlee's racist joke – she “laughed out loud because everything essential to the world the white man saw was there in one dirty joke” (704) – but does not explain explicitly why the joke is funny. Indeed, it is Greenlee who is ridiculously funny, not his joke; the real joke is his blindness to the sacrilege he commits by likening a snake to a human penis and his naïve ignorance of the consequences of mocking the spirits. A more subtle form of ironic humor arises from the narrator's exploitation of the gap between settler-colonial and indigenous epistemologies, when the narrator ventriloquizes Serlo's fear that “[b]rown people would inherit the earth like cockroaches” (A 561). Because when the land is returned, the people will indeed have inherited the earth.

In an interview with Kathleen Kelleheer for the Los Angeles Times, Silko explains her project in Almanac: “‘This whole novel is about reasserting claims for ideas and the truth that all people in America – African, Mexican, Native and Anglo Americans – forget,’ says Silko. ‘It is not just about reasserting claims for the artifacts, pottery and land, but ideals. These ideas and ideals were destroyed 500 years ago when the Europeans burned old Mayan and Aztec almanacs. … Freud talked about forgetting, and it happens to people collectively and as a nation. And so, in America today, whether it's personal or collective, (history) needs to be articulated and remembered. Painful as it might be. …'” (Kelleheer, n.p.). Almanac draws on Freud's theory of the disavowed collective memory of a primal act of violence to expose the state-sponsored repression or disavowal of the anti-colonial race war that has been waged in the Americas since 1492. Such a narrative requires that both the falsely avowed and the disavowed perspectives on history be told in a double-voicing of the manifest and latent meanings of the historical record. The “inherited unconscious substratum
created in the mind by hereditary influences,” described by Freud in Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego (74), as the latent origin of our manifest behaviors is, in Almanac, narrated through the performative translation of the voices of the ancestors that transcend distinctions among past, present, and future and address us all. Concluding her reading of Freud's Moses and Monotheism, Cathy Caruth observes that “history, like trauma, is never simply one's own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's trauma” (24). The way we are implicated in each other's histories Silko dramatizes in Almanac, a novel “in which every story or single character is somehow connected with the other.”

NOTES

2. In a 1992 interview with Linda Niemann, Silko describes how she overcame a writing block by setting aside her manuscript of Almanac to read Sigmund Freud. She likens the writing process to psychoanalysis – “It's like do-it-yourself psychoanalysis. It's sort of dangerous to be a novelist. I really learned it with this one – you're working with language and all kinds of things can escape with the words of a narrative” – then moves abruptly from the issue of the generative power of language to evoke the figure of Freud: “ ... About two-thirds of the way through, I just finally had to stop and read Freud, and I read all eighteen volumes, one right after the other” (Neimann, 109).
3. On the repetition of the image “strange fruit” see the description of one of Max Blue's assassination victims (355) and Judge Arne's “taste for strange fruits” (645), which are contextualized by Yoeme's explanation of her order to cut down all of her husband's beloved cottonwood trees because of the use made of them to lynch Native people (129).
4. The narrative repeatedly identifies grandfather figures with the phrase “the old man”: Root's grandfather who wants to pass as white is “old man Gorgon” (221); Serlo's grandfather who teaches him eugenics is “the old man” (546) as is Judge Arne's grandfather who teaches him bestiality (650); and Zeta thinks of “Grandpa Guzman” as “the old white man” (131). While these grandfathers may all be aligned with the Destroyers, Menardo's tribal grandfather is referred to as “the old man” and so too is the “old man” whose stories are repeated by Menardo's grandfather (256-9). Menardo rejects his tribal ancestry in favor of passing as white, like “old man Gorgon” and so this fusion and confusion around the recursive phrase, “the old man,” suggests that two related patterns of inheritance are at work in the world of the novel and that the characters (like Root, the “throwback,” according to Calabazas (221) can choose whether to become one of the Destroyers.
5. “Acting-out” and the allied concept of “working-through are explained in Freud, 1914 and 1917.
6. However, as Porter Abbott explains, interior monologue is direct and works as the vehicle for stream of consciousness; Silko uses a free indirect style that sustains the grammatical third person (78).
7. Silko interview with Coltelli, quoted in Stanford, 39 n.7.

WORKS CITED

Caruth, Cathy. Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins
Fitz, Brewster E. “Coyote Loops: Leslie Marmon Silko Holds a Full House in Her Hand,” MELUS, 27.3 (Autumn, 2002), pp. 75-91.


Horvitz, Deborah. “Freud, Marx and Chiapas in Leslie Marmon Silko's Almanac of the Dead,” Studies in American Indian Literature, 10.3 (Fall 1998), 47-64.


Quarterly, 31.4 (Fall 2007), 534-58.