

Expanding Materially-Instantiated Social & Spatial Relations:

Almanac of the Dead as a Reconceptualization of History & Modernity

Laurie Rodrigues^{1,*}

Abstract: My study engages Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) with Thomas Edison's short film, "Sioux Ghost Dance," from Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show (c.1894). I will demonstrate how *Almanac* re-imagines traditional social and spatial arrangements, revealing the historically-specific space of social relations and re-announcing the spatial and temporal proportions of that space. The novel's re-mapping of the Americas constitutes an alternatively-networked politics of pure antagonism that simultaneously betrays the discord of "coherent" networks and territorially-confined forms of modernity, but also the antagonism that belies the identitarian subject him/herself. This paper elaborates *Almanac*'s reading of capitalist networks and other Euro-American epistemologies as configuring a logic of stasis. Aligning Edison's film with moments from the novel, I argue that such spatializations imagine actors within a blank space outside of history, figuring them as static scenery to the progress of modernity. Highlighting the virtual and material entanglement of spatial and social relations, Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* asserts that social relations (as material practices) are limited to—and thus refigured by—the spatial formations that they actualize. The novel's materialist strategy for resistance evades multiculturalism's politicized and territorially-confined model of identity. Encountered in this manner, I argue that Silko's novel performs a necessary re-configuration of alternatives to existing, static nationalisms and liberal multicultural identity politics.

Key words: Silko; Agonism; Epistemology; The Americas; Marxism; Territory; Identity Politics

DOI: 10.3968/j.sll.1923156320110203.006

Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* takes place (predominantly) in Southern Arizona and Mexico, spanning an approximately 500-year timeframe. Populated by more than 60 depraved, self-interested main characters, Silko's world consists of addicts, thieves, adulterers, drug runners,

¹ Doctoral Candidate, University of Rhode Island, USA.

* Corresponding Author. Email: rodrigues.laurie@gmail.com

† Received May 15, 2011; accepted June 1, 2011.

murderers, snuff film vendors, and so on. In the novel, the CIA participates in the drug trade, federal judges and police commissioners are easily bribed, land spectators are, at best, unscrupulous and the 'Résistance,' so to speak, is comprised of various fanatical, paranoid conspiracy theorist groups. *Almanac of the Dead* shows us a place where we would never want to live; but with its narrativistic probity and fierceness, the novel slowly reveals to us that we already do.

Almanac of the Dead exposes modernity's territorially-bound political and economic forms and interrogates the contingency and historically-specific spatiality of various subject positions. My reading of *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) seeks to show how this sprawling, 763-page, non-linear narrative reorganizes spatial and social formations, developing a radical re-thinking of both ideological and cultural identitarian assertions, anchoring its theorization in *agonism*—briefly, a skepticism toward politics to overcome deep sociological divisions while emphasizing the potentially positive aspects of social and political conflict.

As an index for my reading of the novel, I append a short film entitled "Sioux Ghost Dance" (available at: <http://youtu.be/uomw37xfmrw>) For the sake of background, very briefly: the Ghost Dance and its associated religion originated from a series of visions experienced by a Nevada Paiute prophet and medicine man, named Wovoka, in 1890. His hopeful news of the Ghost Dance's ability to bring apocalypse upon the white intruders spread rapidly. Of course, the American government panicked when it learned of this prophesy, and as it saw the religious movement consume the Plains Indians Nation, it became bent upon the religion's eradication. During a large ritual dance by the Lakota Sioux at Wounded Knee Creek in South Dakota, December 1890, a company from the American army attacked, killing several chiefs, medicine men, among many others, including women and children. Historically, this event is known as the "Massacre at Wounded Knee."

Four years following the Massacre, at a performance exhibit for Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, Thomas Edison produced the film to which I refer above. Silent, and with a running time of about 33 seconds, at first glance this film hardly seems an appropriate point of departure for the discussion of a 700-plus page novel. However, I will argue that this little film brings into full view what I see Silko's novel trying to perform: the deep ideological influences of American modernity upon our formulations of subjectivity, identity and culture.

What might we note as we look at this film? Several readings might proliferate: A multicultural approach might assert the Ghost Dance, a once-crucial, dynamic movement to Native American culture—a source of hope, an explanation and solution for white oppression—is reduced to stasis in this film. Alternatively, a theorist attuned to the concerns of cultural identity might defend Edison's film as a means for our constant restoration of the Ghost Dance movement, a defense of the culture's implicit right to survive. Indeed, throughout Silko's novel, her indigenous characters, again and again, make assertions of this very sort; *Almanac of the Dead* foregrounds its characters' preoccupations with identitarian struggles.

However, these preoccupations often appear as mere conceits, as the novel's characters perform their identities along a spectrum of intensity: At one end of this continuum, identity takes the form of a frantic 'going through the motions,' the majority of Silko's characters do not fully associate with the identity that they claim; nonetheless, many fervently claim it anyway, in hopes of personal benefit/ eventual vindication—we see this in Bartolomeo, for example, a fanatical Cuban Marxist. Along the rest of the identitarian spectrum, 'self' functions for other characters as a sort of trial and error process—some more devastating than others—resulting in an eventual revelation, a discovery or a leap of faith. Spatially and socially linked to the former group, these characters often find themselves at odds with themselves *as well as* their neighbors, with regard to identification. Not only does this expose a mutual contingency of spatial and social formations, underscoring the fact that they are both conditioning and contingent—both an outcome and a medium for the making of history—but also that identity is structured something like belief, at least in the world of the novel.

But to linger with Edison's film a moment longer: At the zero level, the film shows us a group of people. Their genders are somewhat unclear to the eye, given the film's lighting; but nevertheless, the people appear to be of various ages. They are hopping around in a circular formation, wearing relatively minimal clothing. Primary information on the content of the film (i.e., who the performers are, the name

of the action they perform) is conveyed to us through the video's title. This information presents what is 'real,' but this can be reconstructed only retroactively, from a multitude of symbolic formations (such as historical context), which tell us 'all there actually is' in the film. Apart from this, we have our inflected and conditioned associations, in other words, our own identities—academic, political, social, and so on—to aid our meaning-making. Thus, even with its title, our understanding of the film is still suspect: Highlighting the inextricability of the material and abstract dimensions of our social relations and the space of the film, I read in "Sioux Ghost Dance"—and Silko's novel—the inherent messiness, the general antagonism, of social and political processes.

Essentially, we cannot confront the film's content directly; our understanding relies upon lenses of multiple, virtual formations—or, symbolic fictions, to reference Lacan. And in a second move, by essentially exposing this content to us nonetheless, the film betrays that which is purely virtual, actually nonexistent—this is not our negative access to its meaning, but the meaning *itself* as negativity. In this way, Edison's film presents us with a Deleuzian *impulse image*. Evoking neither the emotion of the affect image *nor* the determinate, realistic world called up by the action-image, the *impulse-image* is one of impulses and animal drives, taking place in an *originary world*—which is to say, a world recognizable by its formless character, a pure impression of "without-background" that is crossed by non-formal acts that do not refer to a constituted subject (Deleuze, 124-25). In our viewing of this impulse-image, the originary world erupts into our determined, realistic world, threatening to render our entire milieu a naturalistic system. And it is at this point of our contact—between our social reality and the originary world—that the interpretive act becomes problematic. In its immanence to the realistic milieu, a multiplicity of interpretations erupt, informed by, not only the film's directive labeling, but our own conditioned/ habitual/ inflected associations. The film, thus, generates a surplus effect that cannot simply be cancelled through demystification.

Interestingly, many of the characters who we meet in *Almanac of the Dead* seek to simultaneously realize and repress the idea of social reality as a naturalistic system, the same desubstantialized form which emerges in Edison's film, through their assertions of cultural metonymy. As discursively contingent, interested agents in the social process (Marxist, Christian, indigenous, and so on), these characters' invested experiences of the identitarian cause emerge as the novel's primary critique of 'self.' As soon as such a subject-position is assumed, a character or group of characters, through the performance of their cause, undermine it through their fundamentalist articulations of that cause; driven by panic, worry, resentment and envy, these characters figure in the novel as deluded—hypocritical, depraved, self-interested. What this figuration shows, through its basic belief that antagonism comes from without, is the discord and antagonism residing at the heart of the One's relation to itself.

For example, Bartolomeo, a Cuban Marxist, is executed by a group of indigenous people because of his indifference to their history. He tries to explain to them their exploitation and the necessity of their revolt against capitalism. They tell him that they do not care about capitalism; they are not respected by white people, so they want to fight white people. When the Bartolomeo preaches to the Indians one too many times on the evils of private property—without stopping to hear their stories of massacres and forced assimilation—they hang him on charges of "crimes against history" (516). What defines Bartolomeo the Marxist is what he believes, but what defines the Indians, essentially, is who they are. While Bartolomeo is deluded by his fanatical adherence to Marxist ideology, Silko shows us that the indigenous people are likewise deluded. Their desire to rid themselves of the presumed hindrance to a fully actualized identity by "fighting white people" is, essentially, as much based in illusion as Bartolomeo's assertions that they should become Marxists, like him.

As this example shows, the novel's larger-scale clash between Euro-Americans and the indigenous peoples of the Americas, then, is *not* one of contradiction, *nor* is it an opposition of terms; rather, it is an *impossible relationship* between the two. The belief that the other is an obstacle in the way of self-identity engages one in the social *reality*—which is merely a multiplicity of symbolic fictions, an illusion (note: the same starting point as our various possible interpretations of Edison's film). What the illusion ignores is that the signification of the subject position (whether ideologically *or* culturally-constituted) is not fixed in advance—it changes according to how it is articulated in a series of equivalences, marked by the metaphoric surplus of other positions. Thus, Bartolomeo and his Marxist comrades cannot effect their anti-capitalist revolution without the emancipation of the Mexican Indians;

likewise, the Mexican Indians cannot effect a reparation of their identity without abandoning the capitalism from which they benefit. From this, we might venture to claim that Silko constructs something of a unified subject position—the general identitarian core animating the novel’s series of particular cultural/ ideological forms. However, this unity is radically contingent, the result of virtual, symbolic condensation; that is to say, it persists in the very irreducible tension that resides between these particularities and never functions as an expression of some internal necessity according to which the interests of all positions will, in the long run, convene.

After all, at the end of Silko’s novel, none of the planned revolutions are carried out; she leaves us, in the end, with no sense of when or if any change will be achieved. Instead, she leaves us with her fanatical characters having made no formal revolutionary/ emancipatory plans; rather, they are in New Mexico, where they plan to attend a healing convention. With this deadlock, Silko shows us that there is no primordial polarity of the indigenous people and the Euro-Americans, just as there’s no polarity between the novel’s many poor or rich characters, the homeless or those with homes, black or white, Marxist or capitalist, and so on. An external enemy, therefore, is a form—a virtual, or symbolic, reality—upon which the impossibility of transcendent identity is externalized. A figure of fascination, this enemy plays a central role in blinding the novel’s identity-assertive characters to the fundamental *bloc* that attends their identity. The transcendent identity, then, functions as a kind of perspective illusion, a reality that can never be seen as ‘whole’ because that reality contains an aporia which constitutes the transcendent identity’s inclusion within reality. This perspective illusion is a misperception of the discord inherent to immanence; so, this antagonism is not an opposition between two poles/ elements/ terms, but a *gap* between identity as such and itself—the void of one’s own place of inscription.

But what of those characters who are not ‘going through the motions’ of identity assertion—the lost, the reflective, the hesitant? Those who are not killed off or converted—such as Sterling, Seese, Lecha, Clinton—all suffer over the course of the novel for their alleged ‘forgetting’ or ‘refusal’ of their identities; by the end of the novel, each of these characters sets about (not a revolution, but) a self-exile: Exiles from their physical homes, as well as from their habitual social relations. From this, we can deduce these characters’ experiences of identity as a *drive*, propelled by, perhaps, an intuited gap in the order of their beings, loss itself as object—in contrast to the fanatics’ experience of identity as *desire*, the filling of the void with fantasmatic incarnations that are figures of the void itself, the lost object.

At the imbalanced heart of Silko’s novel lies the seeming tragedy of identity; over the course of the book, Silko slowly uncovers a perverse network of information—“sorcery,” it is called—that traverses mysteriously linked systems of values. This “sorcery” enables the mutually reinforcing, co-evolving ideological projects of nominalist historicity—or, modernity (such as liberal democracy, capitalism, Christianity, Marxism)—to permeate nearly every aspect of social, ecological and economic life. So at the end of the novel, as the exiles disperse, we cannot help but wonder over their eventual fates. Edison’s film presents an elegant analog for this exilic process: while Silko’s characters follow their respective lines of flight, their drive undoubtedly circles around a threatening black hole. Though they are driven to make of themselves naturalistic processes, they are nevertheless contingent upon the determinate milieu of social reality—spatial, historical, cultural, ideological. “Sioux Ghost Dance” conjures in us the very multitude of fictional, symbolic interpretations—veils of abstraction and aestheticization—to which Silko’s exiles are subjected throughout the novel. *Almanac*’s theorization of Western epistemological stasis comes to us through this (quite basic) betrayal of the entire project of subjectivation/ subjectivization.

However tragic this all may seem, I argue that, at its zero-level, *Almanac of the Dead* vibrates with a fundamentally positive figuration of identity. The novel provokes us to imagine an inoperative form of community and a de-humanization of identity. Rather than validating historically-fixed individual or group interests, Silko’s work suggests that concepts such as identity can reflect an experimentally connective and potentially productive drive—a striving. While *Almanac* emphasizes the various social processes that constitute and frustrate this striving, its (and the film’s) vision of identity is performative and immanent only to itself—and not constituted by these processes (Brown 75). Her novel functions to encourage possibility through a denial of historically cemented and institutionally secured bounds, denying through words and images the effects of wordless, yet potent, material constraints (Brown 134).

In this way, *Almanac of the Dead* encourages an emptying of identity of modernity's various regulatory contents, as we see literalized in "Ghost Dance"; identity here becomes potential movement away from abstracting particularities, a dispersal within an ontological time. Silko suggests that identity is *not* the assertion of a coherently predestined subject, but an eviction of that subject: a performed extraction of the particularities of life propelled toward an unknown future.

REFERENCES

- Brown, W. (1995). *States of injury: Power and freedom in late modernity*. Princeton: Princeton UP.
- Laclau, E. (1990). *New reflections on the revolutions of our time*. New York: Verso.
- Ostler, J. (2004). *The plains sioux and U.S. colonialism from Lewis and Clarke to wounded knee*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Silko, L.M. (1991). *Almanac of the dead*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Deleuze, G. (1986). *Cinema I: The movement image*. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP.
- Zizek, S. (2000). *The ticklish subject: The absent center of political ontology*. New York: Verso.
- . (2006). *The parallax view*. Cambridge: MIT Press.