
Rebecca Tillett, ed. *Howling for Justice: New Perspectives on Leslie Marmon Silko's Almanac of the Dead*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press. 2014.

<http://www.uapress.arizona.edu/Books/bid2491.htm>

As a collection that fills a gap in scholarship on Leslie Marmon Silko's body of work, *Howling for Justice* is broad in scope while maintaining a key focus in its analysis of Silko's epic 1991 novel *Almanac of the Dead*. Clearly grounded in an exploration of how both critical and scholarly responses to *Almanac* have differed from *Ceremony*, Silko's most widely-read and acclaimed work, this collection succeeds at diving head-first into some of the most controversial aspects of Silko's text. As editor Rebecca Tillett notes in the introductory chapter, "given the gentle lyrical beauty of Silko's first novel *Ceremony* (1977), which fed the expectations of readers and critics alike, *Almanac* unsurprisingly generated not only confusion but also a series of passionate and heated responses" (5). Because of this, *Howling for Justice* "analyzes and explores some of the key topics that critics and readers alike have identified as confusing, problematic, and divisive, and provides a means by which the reader can begin to negotiate the world of the text" (8). As a collection, these essays work together to explore the legacy of Silko's *Almanac* more than twenty years after its initial publication, reflecting collectively on the deep resonances between the text and the contemporary socio-political world. Tillett begins the collection with a series of chapters that provide an introduction to the text itself, as well as some useful contextualization of *Almanac* including its place in Silko's broader body of work, critical reception both now and at the time of its appearance, and milestones in scholarly engagements with the text. She also provides an analysis of the relationship between this text and contemporary political activism and social movements, noting the deep resonances between Silko's novel and the emergence of the Zapatistas in 1994, the ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement, the 2008 financial collapse, and movements like Occupy Wall Street and Idle No More. In framing the collection, Tillett argues that *Almanac* is perhaps even more resonant now than it was when it was first published, that it is prophetic in vision, and transnational in scope. The collection follows this framework, maintaining an organization that focuses on grouping readings and analyses of *Almanac* in a way that highlights its relevance to anti-capitalist and environmentalist movements in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Building on Tillett's own reading of *Almanac* as a work of 'environmental and social justice' ("Sixty Million Dead Souls Howl for Justice in the Americas!': *Almanac* as Political Activism and Environmental and Social Justice"), the second section of the text attempts to "situate *Almanac* within a history of multiethnic American literary resistance and revisionism" (9). Entitled "Tales of Trauma," this section includes essays that compare the critical reception of *Almanac* to that of Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved*, use the lens of disability studies to analyze Silko's commentary on Afro-Native histories and communities, and explore how Silko makes use of medical discourse to articulate the relationship between capitalism and the body. In doing so, this section engages the deep discomfort that many readers and critics seem to have felt in response to Silko's creation of what is often perceived as a traumatic and violent world. Expanding on the literary and political goals of representations of trauma, the third section focuses on Silko's allegorical examination of related structures of institutionalized oppression, especially those that have "capitalist, environmental, political, and sexual" dimensions (10). With chapters that place Silko's engagement with Marx alongside Cedric Robinson's *Black*

Marxism (2000) in order to explore the capitalist dimensions of American settlement of Native land and the enslavement of African peoples, critically engage her controversial representation of gay men through the lenses of Freudian psychoanalysis and French feminism, use ecocriticism to explore the relationship between ‘natural’ environmental and technological discourse in the geographies of Silko’s text, and re-read the spatial dimensions of *Almanac* through the lens of urban studies, this section engages analyses of the trauma and violence of *Almanac*’s worlds in order to develop readings that illuminate Silko’s philosophical contributions not only as a novelist but as a political theorist. The final section of the collection, “Transformation and Resistance,” builds along the trajectory established by the earlier sections by extrapolating on the visions of the future incumbent within Silko’s rendering of the spaces and worlds contained within *Almanac*. Through discussions of the gothic dimensions of language and resistance, a re-reading of Silko’s representations of community as prophetically open rather than catastrophically destructive, and an exploration of the literary mechanisms Silko uses to interpellate the reader into activism, this section “calls upon readers to recognize and interpret contemporary struggles of indigenous groups against political, economic, and environmental injustices” (12). And, in what is perhaps the most exciting addition to this collection, this section ends with an extensive interview with Silko in which she reflects on the contours, the meaning, and the life of the novel after the twentieth anniversary of its publication.

The structure of the collection is extremely well thought-out and executed, following an overarching trajectory that begins by taking seriously the common criticism that *Almanac of the Dead* is a bleak, depressing text while offering a more nuanced analysis of it that demonstrates how carefully and thoughtfully it was crafted. True to the title, the collection maintains a central focus on the question of Silko’s vision of justice with some essays that offer some extremely innovative approaches to literary criticism in general and Native literature in specific. For instance, Keely Byars-Nichols’ “The Black Indian with One Foot: Reading Somatic Difference and Disability in *Almanac*” does an excellent job of arguing that Silko’s novel provides an innovative framework for navigating the timely discussion of multiculturalism in numerous fields, including English and Ethnic Studies. She notes that “Silko defies the Eurocentric narrative of history and creates a new definition of multiculturalism that recognizes each separate culture as sovereign, while demonstrating that, for justice or political reversal to take place, there must be collaboration and a sense of a ‘community of difference’ among characters from different racial, cultural, and physical realities” (42). Contributing to a growing body of literature on the relationship between African-descended and Native peoples in North America, Byars-Nichols’ essay offers an astute reading of the intersection of disability, race, and indigeneity in *Almanac* that can encourage broader discussions in the field more generally. Similarly, Amanda Walker Johnson’s “Silko’s *Almanac*: Engaging Marx and the Critique of Capitalism” engages the novel as a theoretical contribution to discussions of Marxism, slavery, and colonialism, arguing that “*Almanac* reenvision[s] the Marx of *Capital* as a storyteller testifying to the embodied impact of capitalist emergence and accumulation, as well as exposing the economy of desires, the ‘thirsts’ that fuel slavery and capitalism, mythologized as vampires and werewolves” (91). Placing *Almanac* alongside Robinson’s *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, Johnson is able to use Silko’s discussion of Marx as another entry point into an exploration of her commentary on the relationship between the European colonization of Africa and the settlement of North America. Ruxandra Rădulescu’s “Unearthing the Urban: City Revolutions in Silko’s *Almanac*” is another bright spot which “investigates the role that cities

play in *Almanac*,” demonstrating that “the minor role to which they are relegated by literary criticism creates a dichotomous view of types of human environment...which Silko’s novel undermines to a large extent” (119). Rădulescu’s urban studies approach to Silko’s novel provides analyses of how previous literary engagements with the text reify the association of Euro-Americanness with the urban and indigeneity with the rural, offering instead a reading of *Almanac* that views cities as revolutionary spaces for indigenous peoples.

Despite strong organization and a number of well-executed and exciting essays, the collection does have some limitations. Perhaps the most glaring is the fact that, though the collection is ostensibly grounded in exploring the relationship between Silko’s novel and contemporary social movements, there is very little engagement with the extensive scholarly literature on those social movements. This may be because much of the discussion of social movements is centered on the continued relevance of *Almanac* in the contemporary moment, rather than providing historical context relating to the time during which it was written. In fact, Silko is essentially the only one who provides this type of context, noting how Reagan’s presidency affected her writing.¹ Given the extensive focus on questions of ecology, ecocriticism and environmentalism in the collection itself, it seems an oversight to not have any in-depth discussion of either the environmental degradation (especially the deforestation of the Amazon rainforest) or environmental justice activism that were both prevalent in the socio-political and cultural world of the Americas in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the era in which *Almanac* was both written and published. This lacuna seems to, perhaps, be due to a larger lack of interdisciplinary engagement throughout the collection—for instance, there is very extensive use of scholars of Native American literature, but very little engagement with scholars in Native American and Indigenous Studies more broadly. The result is that ‘justice’ ends up being a relatively murky concept throughout the text. Though there are some brief mentions of Native land reclamation, sovereignty, and self-determination, there aren’t any more thorough uses of Native studies scholarship to flesh out what this concept of ‘justice’ might mean for Native communities and why.

Though no collection can carry out an analysis of every single aspect of a novel, especially one as extensive and complex as *Almanac*, the fact that ‘justice’ is proposed as a central tenet of both Silko’s text and the authors’ examination of it means that the reader needs a more concrete examination of it in both literary and conceptual terms. In the end, these limitations seem to be an issue rooted in a framing that isn’t completely realized rather than in any lack of skill, precision, or originality. Rather than ending up as an interdisciplinary collection that deeply engages the root and expression of justice in Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead*, it is an excellent demonstration of the breadth and depth of literary criticism on this text. It is, indeed, exciting to have a collection of essays that provide such a thoughtful and thorough look at a novel that does not seem to have received the amount of scholarly or popular engagement that is warranted by the level of its profundity, perception, and prophecy.

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¹ In the interview that finishes the collection, Silko herself notes: “At the beginning of the eighties, when I was first writing *Almanac*, Ronald Reagan got elected, and you could begin to

see terrible days were coming. And it was after Reagan got elected that they began to interfere with the Indian tribes located along the border with Mexico...And so I wasn't thinking about the readers at all, but about human beings and human communities, in the past, present, and in the future. If what came out was bleak and violent, I did not invent that: I only reported it, and I did not do it because I was trying to sell books or make people like me. I was only performing the work that a novelist does, which is to try to elucidate the situation and try to reveal some kind of truth. Certainly in the Americas and in the U.S., that's what the big money-maker powers don't want: they don't want anyone to tell the truth" (206).