

## [Review] Rebecca Tillett, ed. (2014) Howling for justice: new perspectives on Leslie Marmon Silko's Almanac of the dead

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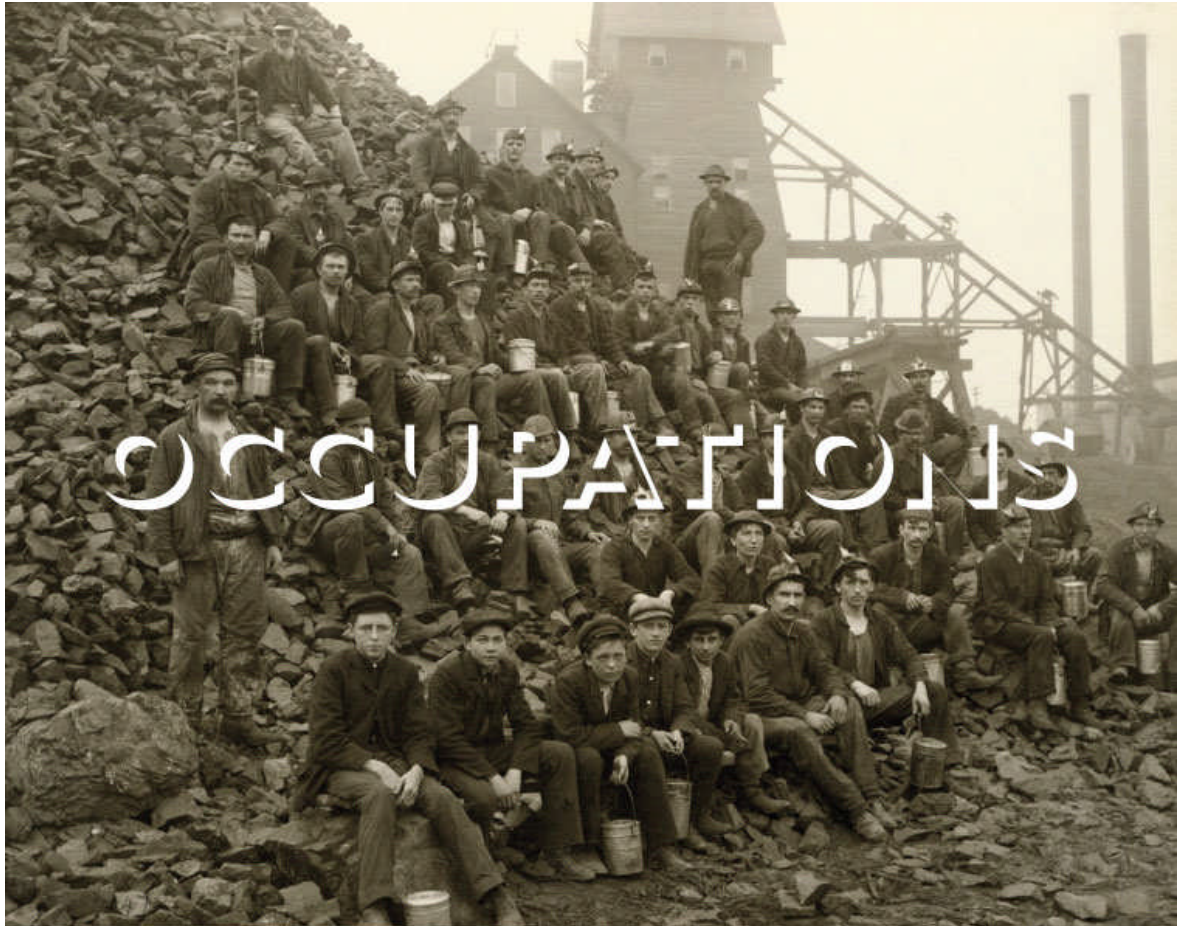
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## Reviews

**Kiron Ward**

*University of Sussex*

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

The publication of Leslie Marmon Silko's much-anticipated second novel, *Almanac of the Dead* in 1991, was greeted with a toxic mix of celebration and disappointment. Silko, whose previous novel, *Ceremony*, won the Pulitzer Prize, had become popular for a subtle, lyrical style that adapted Pueblo storytelling to contemporary concerns. *Almanac of the Dead*, weighing in at 763 pages, takes as its subject 'depravity and cruelty' in the Americas since European occupation began in 1492, and prophesies the 'eventual disappearance of all things European' (Silko, 1991, pp.316, 570). Amidst its

seventy-odd characters and its litanies of horror, from police torture to child abuse, *Almanac of the Dead* is a novel that can feel very far away from subtlety or lyricism. Fourteen years after *Ceremony*, and a MacArthur Foundation 'Genius Grant' later, Silko's approach to fiction had changed.

Among critics, there was immediate disagreement: what Melissa Hearn described as a 'profound teaching story and a spiritual vision for the planet' (Hearn, 1993, p.151), Sven Birkerts denounced as a series of 'wish-fulfilment scenarios' (Birkerts, 1991, p.41); where Linda Niemann saw a 'radical, stunning manifesto' (Niemann, 1992, p.1), Alan Ryan perceived an author and a novel 'in need of remedial help' (Ryan, 1992, D6). *Howling for Justice: New Perspectives on Leslie Marmon Silko's Almanac of the Dead* is the first book dedicated solely to Silko's *magnum opus*, and contextualises its work within this difficult reception. This is a necessary starting point, as Rebecca Tillett explains in her introduction: 'Silko's popular readership had, and often still has, real problems with the text' (p.5). This critical schism has, rather than mellowing in the intervening years, metastasised.

While Silko's canonisation as one of the most important (and anthologisable) voices of the so-called 'Native American Renaissance' has become entrenched, *Almanac* has been subject to some major attacks. Richard Rorty, for example, has denounced *Almanac's* 'whole-hearted, gut-wrenching disgust for white America' (Rorty, 1998, p.12). Similarly, Walter Benn Michaels reads it as promoting 'ethnonationalism' at the expense of 'class and the elimination of economic difference' (Michaels, 2004, p.24). Perhaps most stingingly, indigenous critic Elizabeth Cook-Lynn has complained that the text's 'cosmopolitanism' is a cynical escapism from local tribal struggles (Cook-Lynn, 1996, p.80). On top of all this, accusations of the text's homophobia are often all but accepted by even its champions (see particularly: St. Clair, 1999; Donnelly, 1999). The essays in *Howling for Justice* look for a way beyond this schism, and try to locate 'the real hope within the text' (p.8). As Tillett explains, 'The overwhelming dystopic world of *Almanac* contradictorily incorporates a much more utopian vision: that the depraved worlds depicted are—and can be—countered by the recognition of an alternative worldview based on indigenous concepts of reciprocity and justice' (p.8).

In order to achieve this, *Howling for Justice* takes a broadly multi-disciplinary approach to *Almanac of the Dead's* thematic and stylistic complexity. By doing this, Tillett has chosen to work with a particular trend in Silko criticism, typified by the work

of critics such as Joni Adamson, Claudia Sadowski-Smith, and Shari Huhndorf; as she explains,

the most significant and exciting recent and current work on *Almanac* has emerged in direct response to Silko's transnational focus on matters of environmental and social justice, from scholarly fields as diverse as indigenous studies, border studies, environmental justice studies, ecocritical studies, social justice studies, and political justice studies. (p.7)

This smart editorial decision has ensured that this collection develops, rather than rehashes, key themes in *Almanac* criticism, and makes it an essential addition to studies of Silko and contemporary Native American writing. The 12 constituent essays are divided into three sections—'Tales of Trauma', 'Allegories of Apocalypse', and 'Transformation and Resistance'—and are appended by Laura Coltelli's heretofore-unpublished interview with Silko from 2010. The divisions feel relatively arbitrary, not least because the essays speak so readily across them, and bring to light some major advances in *Almanac* criticism.

Most compelling among these issues, and possibly most controversial within the context of the ongoing 'Freedpeople' controversies,<sup>1</sup> are the essays by Keely Byars-Nichols and Amanda Walker Johnson on the connections *Almanac* draws between Africa and the Americas. At the end of *Almanac*, Clinton, a self-identifying 'black Indian',<sup>2</sup> thinks to himself that '[n]othing could be black only or brown only or white only anymore': this is part of the message he must 'explain to the people' (Silko, 1991, p.747). Byars-Nichols and Johnson use Clinton and his anti-essentialist radicalism as a key example of how Silko builds on the overlap between African and indigenous history to disrupt certain key categories. Byars-Nichols focuses on definitions of 'blackness' and 'Indianness', reading *Almanac* as 'a multicultural text that challenges both Eurocentric paradigms and Native American notions of separatism' (p.53). Johnson, by way of Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism*, looks at how Silko's critique of Marxism and Eurocentricity works by figuring slavery as an 'African-Native crossroads' (p.91) that decentres the Marxist critique of capitalism. Both make the important implication that it is not possible to read Silko's work outside of the 'Freedpeople' controversies.

By far the most divisive theme to emerge from the collection, and in Silko criticism at large, is the difficulty of interpreting the challenge *Almanac* poses to liberal

sensibilities: this is a book that can appear to be opposed to medical advances, and which has been described as containing too many malevolent homosexual men for comfort. Janet St. Clair's reading of the latter as *Almanac's* 'problematics of metaphor' has become a decisive statement on how to read this discomfort, and has inaugurated a discrete strain within Silko criticism. For St. Clair, Silko's supposed homophobia must be read rather as 'a metaphor of the insane solipsism and androcentric avarice that characterize the dominant culture' (St. Clair, 1999, p.207), and in her reading, this is *Almanac's* major challenge to its readers: '[m]ired in negative stereotypes, it offends. On the other hand, the metaphor works' (St. Clair, 1999, p.208). St. Clair's insistence on reading apparently offensive content as straightforwardly allegorical looms over two of the collection's most provocative essays: Joanna Ziarkowska's discussion of Silko's medical discourse and Dorothea Fischer-Hornung's analysis of her use of abjection to characterise sexuality. These two essays represent divergent responses to St. Clair's earlier work: Ziarkowska builds on St. Clair's method to outline *Almanac's* critique of healthcare as an '[illustration] of how race, gender, and class intersect in the twentieth-century United States' (p.58), while Fischer-Hornung challenges it, insisting that reading negative stereotyping as strictly metaphorical neither adequately explains Silko's method nor pays adequate attention to *Almanac's* investment in the 'Freudian theory' (Silko, 1991, p.173) one of her main characters expounds. Fischer-Hornung's contribution is particularly strong, combining readings of Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* and Luce Irigaray's *This Sex Which Is Not One* with Michael Taussig's *Mimesis and Alterity* and Richard C. Trexler's *Sex and Conquest* to theorise *Almanac's* characters as a cast of 'psychologically ravaged adults who are the product of their own civilization, the rejection by their mothers and the total absence of their fathers' (p.78).

A handful of the collection's essays look to the ways *Almanac* deconstructs Eurocentric mythologies. Annette van Dyke's essay—a refreshingly comparative look at *Almanac* alongside Toni Morrison's *Beloved*—convincingly argues that both texts explore 'the pornographic mind' (p.29) of their European characters as a way of writing about history that has been expunged from popular narratives. Susan Berry Brill de Ramírez's contribution focuses on how Silko rewrites the traditional gothic as a way of tracking how discursive language can 'wreak objectifying destruction' (p.136). For Jessica Maucione, the mythology at stake is that of the 'inevitability attached to U.S. global hegemony': in her reading, Silko produces a counter-mythology 'of the inevitability of a reconstituted Native America' (p.157). Maucione's proposition that

*Almanac* imagines a 'place-based' radical politics is a pleasingly utopian take on the grimness of much of the novel, and arguably meets Tillet's stated aim to locate 'the real hope in the novel' (p.8).

Unsurprisingly, given *Almanac*'s focus on environmental exploitation and degradation, another clear theme to emerge between the essays is ecocriticism. Graeme Finnie and David L. Moore both focus on what kind of ethics can be inferred from *Almanac*'s suggestion that environmental renewal depends on 'the eventual disappearance of all things European' (Silko, 1991, p.570). Finnie discusses intelligently *Almanac*'s Leah Blue, a developer building a city modelled on Venice in the Arizona desert, pointing out that her narrative follows precedents set by the 1902 Water Reclamation Act. In a move borrowed from James Tarter's important essay on *Ceremony* (Tarter, 2005), Finnie characterises Silko as rejecting Western 'nature/culture dualism' to posit that the nonhuman 'is utterly cultural, born of a long tenure at a particular place' (p.115). Moore, whose contribution explicitly elaborates his superb essay on witnessing in *Almanac* (Moore, 1999), approaches the text similarly: he eloquently posits that part of what is witnessed is 'the life even in death, the life in nature and the earth' which affirms 'a kind of animism' (p.179). For Moore, this amounts to 'an ecologic of ethics' that defines Silko's 'ethics of reality' (p.179). These two essays speak fruitfully to Ruxandra Rădulescu's analysis of the role of cities in *Almanac*: given the ethical bases they propose, Silko's portrait of a 'rhizomatic' (p.132) Tucson at the end of *Almanac* comes to look like the end of culture's occupation of nature.

Occupation is a theme that underpins Tillet's opening and Adamson's closing essays. Indeed, if *Almanac* is an epic of the 500 years since European-American contact, it is ultimately an epic of occupation; that *Almanac*'s uncanny prescience extends to the similarities between its 'Army of the Homeless' and the Occupy movement is a fact with which Tillet in particular makes hay. For Tillet, the emergence of the Occupy movement in 2011 is to be greeted by Silko criticism with the same auspiciousness with which it greeted the establishment of the North American Free Trade Agreement and the emergence of the Zapatistas in Chiapas in 1992.<sup>3</sup> This is important for Tillet's method, and for the collection's guiding multi-disciplinary principle as a whole: new perspectives on *Almanac*'s howl for justice are found by reading these occurrences almost as if they are part of the novel's web. This leads Tillet to focus on *Almanac* as activism, its importance lying in its ability to outline a world in

which the 'ever-present dead' signal to us the ways in which the horrors of the past are being repeated callously by 'political elites and powerful private corporate interests' (pp.14, 24). Similarly for Adamson, the recent adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples provides a way of thinking through *Almanac's* vision of an alternative globalisation, a 'network of tribal coalitions' (Silko, 1991, p.737), that can supplant the occupation of international neoliberalism. Adamson, looking principally to anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena's theory of 'indigenous cosmopolitics' (de la Cadena, 2010), outlines compellingly the mechanics of *Almanac's* vision of a 'more plural politics' as a type of unity beyond difference: Silko 'brings together ragtag characters who believe that mountains are sentient with others who do not [...] because they agree that protecting the earth is key to the survival of all living beings' (pp.193, 189).

Of course, there is a limit to criticism that builds on its subject's supposed prescience. It is, however, an approach explicitly advocated by Silko in the interview at the end of the collection; she explains:

my friend in Ciudad [Juárez], Chihuahua, e-mailed me last year, and he said *Almanac of the Dead* is coming true in Mexico [...] it's the beginning of a civil war [...] the people are going to come pouring over our border, and it's only going to escalate, so what I wrote is true. (p.208)

For Silko, as 'horrifying' as it is, she concedes that she hopes 'it works out like it does in *Almanac* and [...] turns out right in the end' (pp.209, 208). As a final authorial word on *Almanac*, the suggestion that it 'turns out right in the end' is important: for Silko, the text's 'real hope' (p.8) remains its salient point.

That said, Tillett is right to highlight that the Occupy movement, important as it is, 'falls somewhat short of the kinds of intercultural community interconnections that *Almanac* advocates' (p.22). She is equally right to point out that its failures are partly down to its blithe use of 'colonial and even imperialist terminology' that 'fails to recognize that all of the United States is "occupied" indigenous land' (p.22). As the Anishinaabe writer John Paul Montano wrote in an open letter to the Occupy activists, 'I am not one of the 99 percent that you refer to. And, that saddens me. Please don't misunderstand me. I would *like* to be one of the 99 percent ... but you've chosen to exclude me' (Montano, 2011). That *Howling for Justice* is able to make the case for *Almanac's* importance beyond its divisiveness and within the context of social justice



activism is a testament to how multidisciplinary approaches to fiction and single-author studies can make coherent political points; or, in the terse words of Mohawk activist Jessica Yee: 'THE UNITED STATES IS ALREADY BEING OCCUPIED' (Yee, 2011).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> These pertain to the difficult and often ill-tempered discussions about the tribal membership rights of Africans descended from slaveholding Native American tribes. For more on this subject and its history, see: Littlefield 1979; Katz 1986; Forbes 1993; Brooks 1998; Miles and Holland 2006.

<sup>2</sup> 'Black Indian' characters are a recurring feature in Silko's post-*Ceremony* oeuvre, particularly in *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999).

<sup>3</sup> See particularly Deborah Horvitz, 'Freud, Marx and Chiapas in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*' (1998).

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