

Bordering Black Studies: Silko and the Americas

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“You don’t go into coalition because you just *like* it. The only reason you would consider trying to team up with somebody who could possibly kill you, is because that’s the only way you can figure you can stay alive.”

--Bernice Johnson Reagon

Bernice Johnson Reagon’s famous statement on coalition politics brings together many of the animating ideas and impulses of this talk on Leslie Marmon Silko’s 1991 novel *Almanac of the Dead* and the borders of black studies. Reagon’s is a particularly apt description of the kinds of coalition politics enacted by characters within the novel. And it’s a particularly apt metaphor for what I see as the key rationale for those doing Black Studies and Native American Studies to practice coalition politics within, across, and beyond academic institutions.

Answering three questions about Silko’s novel will help me flesh out both this rationale and the possibilities that following through on it opens up. How does *Almanac of the Dead* represent Black Studies? What does it mean to consider Silko’s novel as part of Black Studies? What follows from this dual perspective on *Almanac of the Dead* as simultaneously commenting on and participating in the Black Studies project? Before answering these questions, though, I should give some sense of the style of Silko’s apocalyptic, prophetic novel. So, in lieu of a plot summary, let me offer a few examples of coalition politics from *Almanac of the Dead*. Keep in mind as I go through these examples that the novel is set in a time like but not quite our own: black South Africans have won their freedom through a violent, bloody revolution; Mohawk nations are at war with Canada and the United States; riots and looting have broken out in a dozen U.S. cities along with massive civil unrest in Mexico; both nations face economic collapse even as their political and military elites plot to maintain their hold on power by turning the southwest U.S. and northern Mexico into a police state; and tycoons are profiting off a traffic in pirated body parts and building orbiting biospheres in which to escape the global ecological crisis they helped create.

So let’s start at the end of the novel, during the International Holistic Healers Convention, in an unofficial meeting in Room 1212 in which a small group of characters we have come to know over the previous 700-

some pages spend the night discussing "a network of tribal coalitions dedicated to the retaking of ancestral lands by indigenous people" (737). This isn't just talk, either, even as our protagonists are meeting, twin brothers Tacho and El Feo are leading what is described as a "great migration" of largely Mayan peoples from El Salvador, Guatemala, and southern Mexico in a non-violent march on the U.S. border (738). The coalitions arrived at in the course of this meeting are all aimed at ensuring that these marchers are not slaughtered on the way to, or at, the border. A character known as the Barefoot Hopi has been pursuing a dual strategy, on the one hand traveling the world to gain the support of African, Islamic, and Asian governments and on the other laying the groundwork for a U.S.-wide or even multi-national prison uprising. He has gained the support of radical "eco-warriors" who have agreed to dynamite power plants and high-voltage wires when the prison uprising begins, as well as an anarchist Korean hacker who has created a protocol virus to disable power company computers. One of the organizers of an army of the homeless, a black Vietnam vet named Clinton, agrees to coordinate urban uprisings with the blackouts, prison riots, and arrival of the marchers from the South. Meanwhile, another coalition is forming among the indigenous women in the room: Zeta, a Yaqui cross-border gunman, has agreed to supply the Mayan revolutionary Angelita La Escapia with additional weaponry with which to defend the marchers from the South, while the Eskimo leader Rose promises to attack from the North.

What unites these indigenous coalitions in *Almanac of the Dead* is a desire to reclaim their land, a common sense of history and temporality, a trust in ancient prophecies and ancestor spirits, and a confidence that others will join their struggle. These beliefs are shared by the most visionary and the most militant members of the coalition. Even the march leader El Feo, who voices the old-time prophecies that "History was unstoppable. The days, years, and centuries were spirit beings who traveled the universe, returning endlessly. The Spirits of Night and the Spirits of the Day would take care of the people" (523), foresees mass uprisings:

All across the earth there were those listening and waiting, isolated and lonely, despised outcasts of the earth. First the lights would go out—dynamite or earthquake, it did not matter. All sources of electrical power generation would be destroyed. Darkness was the ally of the poor. One uprising would spark another and another. (513)

Conversely, even the militaristic Angelita shares El Feo's spiritual beliefs: "We are the army to retake tribal land. Our army is only one of many all over the earth quietly preparing. The ancestors' spirits speak in dreams. We wait. We simply wait for the earth's natural forces already set loose, the exploding, fierce energy of all the dead slaves and dead ancestors haunting the Americas" (518). El Feo's twin brother Tachobring brings together both the visionary and the militant strands when he

recalls the arguments people in villages had over the eventual disappearance of the white man. Old prophets were adamant; the disappearance would not be caused by military action, necessarily, or by military action alone. The white man would someday disappear all by himself. The disappearance had already begun at the spiritual level.

The forces were harsh. A great many people would suffer and die. All ideas and beliefs of the Europeans would gradually wither and drop away. (511)

At the same time, those making up the coalition know full well that despite their urgency and their planning, "Conjunctions and convergences of global proportions might take six or seven hundred years to develop," as the Barefoot Hopi puts it (618), while what Zeta calls "the war...for the continents called the Americas" had been going on for only five hundred years (133).

Almanac of the Dead ends without representing the realization of these plans for revolutionary indigenist mobilization to reclaim the Americas because Silko's point is to show her readers how to recognize when a new day is dawning—when the "reign of death-eye dog" is giving way to the "reign of fire-eye macaw"—not predict precisely what the future holds for the New World. Thus, my point in going over these examples of coalition politics in *Almanac* is not to urge us to model our disciplinary border-crossings and academic coalitions on them. We are not the organic intellectuals Silko is interested in portraying; the kinds of narratives and modes of analysis her characters deploy are meant to mobilize the homeless, the landless, and the imprisoned, while our primary impact is through our teaching, our writing, and the institutions we help build. Moreover, our incredulity toward metanarratives, our anti-essentialism, and our distrust of totalizing narratives will lead us to approach *Almanac* with a scholar's skepticism rather than a convert's enthusiasm. That said, I do want to focus our attention on some of the curricular and institutional implications of the representation of coalition politics in *Almanac of the Dead*. Silko's novel presents those of us doing Black Studies with an important opportunity to see how the field looks from outside its borders, so to speak, and a way of locating our field in a transnational, even global frame.

Clinton, the black Vietnam veteran I had mentioned earlier as part of the indigenist coalition, is the figure through whom Silko presents her take on Black Studies. Through his emphases, Silko suggests what is most important to her in Black Studies, not least of which is its very existence, for in the alternate universe of her novel, Black Studies never got off the ground: "After the riots and the Vietnam War, there had been no more university funding for black studies classes" (431). Giving Clinton the opportunity to attend college before this catastrophe, Silko emphasizes that "The only subject Clinton had cared about in college had been black studies" (414), although he "only took notes on the subjects that excited him, such as the black Indians or the spirits and African people" (420). After surviving Vietnam, his goal is to continue and to transmit his education; he prepares radio broadcasts that "sound like lectures from a black studies class" all of which describe the way that "great American and great African tribal cultures had come together to create a powerful consciousness within all people" (431, 426). As one of his scripts reads, "Slavery joined forever the histories of the tribal people of the Americas with the tribal people of Africa. On La Isla de Hispaniola escaped African slaves called maroons fled to the remote mountains where the remaining bands of Arawak Indians took them in" (428). In fact, Clinton attributes the Haitian revolution to what he earlier called the "marriage" of "the spirits of Africa and the Caribbean Islands" (417). In his script-writing and notebook compiling, Clinton resembles no one more than Angelita, who similarly takes what she needs from the Cuban-sponsored Marxist Freedom School near Mexico City. His four-page list of slave revolts parallels her three-page recounting of Native American resistance (742-746, 527-530). Through Clinton's interests and activities, then, Silko not only calls our attention to two themes in Black Studies that she considers most crucial—the survival and transformation of African religious practices in the New World and the spiritual, sexual, and political connections between surviving Africans and Native Americans from the sixteenth century onwards—but she also puts these versions of Black Studies in dialogue and coalition with related indigenist narratives and narrators.

One way of looking at *Almanac of the Dead*, then, is as an attempt to bring together two kinds of histories of the Americas: what meets in Clinton might be said to be the attention to the black radical tradition epitomized by such figures as C.L.R. James (in *The Black Jacobins*) and *The History of Negro Revolt*) and

Cedric Robinson (in *Black Marxism and Black Movements in America*) along with the re-vision of New World history by such figures as Ward Churchill and Jack Forbes. To take just one example, in his study *Africans and Native Americans: The Language of Race and the Evolution of Red-Black Peoples*, originally published in 1988, Forbes counters assumptions about the disappearance of Native Americans from the New World by arguing that “What has in fact happened is that *American survivors and African survivors... have merged together to create the basic modern populations of much of the Greater Caribbean and adjacent mainland regions*” (270). Clinton’s interest in “black Indians” is a measure of the degree to which Silko’s rewriting of New World history should be seen as a novelistic response to Forbes’s discussion of the implications of his main finding: the need for “students of North American history and society who have been fascinated solely with the Black-White nexus or who have conceived of Black and Native American history as being two largely separate streams... to re-examine their assumptions” (219).

By the same token, Clinton’s interest in the “ancestor spirits” and the transformation of African religions in the New World is a measure of the degree to which Silko’s novel participates in as well as comments on the Black Studies project. From Zora Neale Hurston’s *Mules and Men* to Maryse Condé’s *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*, from Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo* to Charles Johnson’s *Middle Passage*, from Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters* to Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow*, African-American (in the continental rather than national sense of the latter term) novelists have told stories about spirits of resistance. They have inspired projects like Antonio Benitez-Rojo’s *The Repeating Island* and Barbara Browning’s *Infectious Rhythm*, so it should be no surprise that these and other novelists have also inspired *Almanac of the Dead*. But despite the thematic and other similarities among these works, I would place Silko’s novel in most direct relation to three novels in particular—W.E.B. Du Bois’s *Dark Princess*, Paule Marshall’s *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*, and Patrick Chamboiseau’s *Texaco*—for each of these novels attempts to trace connections between the earliest encounters among Africans, Europeans, and Americans in the New World and present-day political and economic structures and movements, and each represents a different moment in internationalist Black Studies—Du Bois’s pan-Africanism and Marshall’s third worldism are well worth comparing to Silko’s indigenist narrative. In short, by analyzing how Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead* takes part

in the Black Studies project, we can come up with ideas about how to continue its development, reach new audiences, and rethink its curricular and institutional practices and priorities.

This kind of rethinking could take the form of new research projects, such as Sharon Holland's studies of Afro-Native American literature, or Ami Regier's study of Silko's retheorizing of fetishism, or other explorations of connections and overlaps between Black and Native American Studies. It could manifest itself in a range of cross-listed courses in literature, history, and critical race studies. It could manifest itself in team teaching between scholars in Black Studies and American Indian Studies, as well as in jointly-sponsored conferences, teach-ins, and public events. It could manifest itself in efforts to educate the educators of our future students, and in remaining open to being educated by the communities in which we live and teach. As you can see, the possibilities are limited only by our own sense of the urgency of such coalition-building projects and ingenuity in making them happen.

But what I want to close with is the larger challenge that Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* poses to those of us doing Black Studies. Over and above more or less episodic academic coalitions, what Silko's portrait of a world without Black Studies suggests is needed is a willingness to build bridges beyond the borders of our fields and our institutions.

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