
Louise K. Barnett and James L. Thorson, eds. *Leslie Marmon Silko: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999. 319p.

KARA JACOBI
UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

With hundreds of articles, book chapters, and dissertations dedicated to her work over the past several decades, and the prevalence of *Ceremony* (1977) and stories such as “Storyteller” and “Yellow Woman” on syllabi and in anthologies, Leslie Marmon Silko’s reputation as one of the foremost Native American authors of the twentieth century is firmly established. Despite the vast and varied critical attention paid to Silko’s fiction, Louise K. Barnett and James L. Thorson’s *Leslie Marmon Silko: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1999), now in print for nearly a decade, remains the only grouping that ostensibly attempts to cover the scope of Silko’s oeuvre. The book includes essays on *Storyteller* (1981) and Silko’s nonfiction collections *Sacred Water* (1993) and *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit* (1996), but emphasizes the epic novel *Almanac of the Dead* (1991), to which six of the collection’s twelve critical essays devote their attention. In the introduction, Barnett and Thorson point out that none of the essays included focuses entirely on *Ceremony*, Silko’s most widely read and critically acclaimed work; the editors aim to correct what they see as an imbalance in Silko scholarship, which previously ignored *Almanac* and valued *Ceremony* more highly. Several of the selections refer to *Ceremony* in their readings of Silko’s other texts, but those seeking a comprehensive collection that devotes “equal attention to Silko’s three major texts” (2) may not be completely satisfied with Barnett and Thorson’s volume.

The collection begins with a brief biographical sketch (“A Laguna Woman”) by Robert M. Nelson, which foregrounds the importance of Laguna, the land, and storytelling in all of Silko’s work and serves mostly as a reminder of Silko’s major concerns and background for readers who already have some knowledge of the circumstances out of which Silko writes. Paul Beekman Taylor’s essay “Silko’s Re-appropriation of Secrecy” is the first major critical essay in the collection, and the editors explain that its early placement is due to “its ambitiously comprehensive approach” (3). This is an apt description; although the reader must be extensively familiar with Silko’s work to follow Taylor’s argument, reading this chapter is rewarding for scholars who are.

Next, a group of essays considers *Storyteller* (1981). Because of the multi-genre composition of the text, critics included in this collection tend to locate organizational schemes for the work by grouping its contents into sections. Linda Krumholz’s “Native Designs: Silko’s *Storyteller* and the Reader’s Initiation” is particularly useful

in the way it reads the work as a collection governed by deliberate rhetorical and organizational logic. Helen Jaskoski's "To Tell a Good Story" emphasizes the myriad forms and genres employed in the collection's fiction through excellent close readings of several of the short stories; that said, Jaskoski does not explore the photographic components of Silko's text. Elizabeth McHenry ("Spinning a Fiction of Culture"), on the other hand, is much more interested in the role of the photographs in the text and the autobiographical frame Silko provides. Elizabeth Hoffman Nelson and Malcolm A. Nelson create an even sharper focus in their article on "Yellow Woman" ("Shifting Patterns, Changing Stories: Leslie Marmon Silko's Yellow Woman"), which primarily compares the revisionary "Yellow Woman" and its characters with *Ceremony's* Tayo and Ts'eh, emphasizing the ways in which Silko rewrites the traditional Keres myth.

Daniel White's "Antidote to Desecration: Leslie Marmon Silko's Nonfiction" usefully analyzes several of Silko's essays collected in *Sacred Water* and *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*. Reading Silko's essays primarily in terms of themes of communal spirit, the importance of humans' relationship with the land, and Silko's often apocalyptic vision, White quotes from Silko's prose at length, making this chapter a good introduction for the beginning reader of these essays. Given the relative dearth of critical focus on Silko's nonfiction, which is frequently referenced, though briefly, in articles on her novels and short fiction, White's essay proves a valuable resource.

The second half of the collection includes six essays on *Almanac of the Dead*. Through their diverse arguments, all of the critics find Silko's text to be an important and difficult novel that implicates the destructiveness of the Eurocentric worldview. David L. Moore's "Silko's Blood Sacrifice: The Circulating Witness in *Almanac of the Dead*" is the most extensive study of the novel; Moore considers the relationship of *Almanac* to Silko's earlier works, describing Silko's virtue of "radical patience," the importance of witnessing (which must precede telling), and Silko's subversion of binaries in her model of witnessing (traditionally seen as a passive act) as a site of potential for affecting the colonial predicament. Ami M. Regier, in one of the most original essays in the collection ("Material Meeting Points of Self and Other: Fetish Discourse and Leslie Marmon Silko's Evolving Conception of Cross-Cultural Narrative"), traces the meaning of the fetish and its relationship to indigenous cultures before arguing for the fetish as a "dialectical object," and in *Almanac*, "as revolutionary" (201). According to Regier, in addition to including fetish objects that are more traditionally aligned with tribal belief systems, Silko also vivifies technological objects, combining tribal fetishism with commodity fetishism and thus updating and revolutionizing the role of fetish in culture. Janet

St. Clair's provocatively titled "Cannibal Queers: The Problematics of Metaphor in *Almanac of the Dead*," tackles one of the most oft-cited critiques of the novel: its overwhelmingly negative portrayal of male homosexuality. She lucidly argues that homosexuality serves as an elaborate metaphor in *Almanac*, symbolic of "male-dominated individualistic Euro-culture" (209). Though St. Clair is troubled by the possibility that Silko's metaphor will reify particularly dangerous stereotypes about homosexuals, she ultimately reads the depiction of cannibalistic gay men in *Almanac* as "appropriate to Silko's apocalyptic landscape" (221).

Caren Irr analyzes *Almanac* as a postmodern radical novel exploring multiple temporalities in "The Timeliness of *Almanac of the Dead*, or a Postmodern Rewriting of Radical Fiction." Irr's chapter incorporates several philosophers and theorists (Benjamin, Heidegger, Jameson, and Lukacs to name a few), considers Silko's use of Marx, and refers to several other modern novelists like Joyce and Woolf in establishing *Almanac* as "a timely new form of radical novel" (242). In "Old and New Notebooks: *Almanac of the Dead* as Revolutionary Entertainment," Daria Donnelly argues that the brand of storytelling featured in the novel—expansive, ongoing, and often without a narrative resolution—is a site of justice. Although Donnelly mentions that comedy is an important quality of *Almanac*, the essay seems to only address this concern tangentially (mostly through connecting it with the "heteroglossia" of the novel), while it more often elucidates the role of storytelling and explicates the meaning of the notebooks in Silko's text. Finally, Janet M. Powers compares *Almanac* to Dante's *Commedia* ("Mapping the Prophetic Landscape in *Almanac of the Dead*"), ultimately seeing both Silko and Dante as visionaries presenting horrific prophecies in order to effect change in a society gone violently wrong.

To close the collection, Barnett and Thorson include a bibliographic essay by Connie Capers Thorson ("Leslie Marmon Silko and Her Work: A Bibliographic Essay"), which thoroughly highlights the most valuable Silko criticism. The bibliographic essay is useful and the fifteen-page bibliography is extensive (though, the editors and Thorson herself point out, "not exhaustive"), but readers must be aware that this is only a starting point, as there has been a proliferation of critical work on Silko in the past decade, including much more attention to *Almanac* and book-length studies of *Ceremony* (e.g., *Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony: A Casebook*, ed. Allan Chavkin, 2002) and Silko's most recent work *Gardens in the Dunes* (*Reading Leslie Marmon Silko's Gardens in the Dunes: Contact Zones and Cross Currents*, ed. Laura Coltelli, 2007).

With its wide-ranging examples of Silko criticism, the complexity and importance of Silko's work is definitely reflected in Barnett and Thorson's valuable volume. In the past nine years, since *A Collection of Critical Essays*' original appearance, work

on *Almanac of the Dead* has exploded, but Barnett and Thornson remain the only editors to attempt to collect critical perspectives on the novel in one place. Some of the essays are accessible to readers who are just beginning to appreciate Silko's work, but most of the selections are directed toward critics more deeply engaged with these texts and presume a prior knowledge of Silko's background and work; therefore, scholars of Silko and Native American literature should find this volume to be a great resource. Barnett and Thorson have succeeded in providing all readers with a sense of Silko's concerns, and their selections make a strong argument for Silko's place as a major American author. ✱