

The Semiotics of Subjectification in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*

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In Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Almanac of the Dead*, affects are shown to create and mobilize the characters of her fiction. Structures of feeling are connected to ongoing colonial forms of domination, exploitation, and violence. Through story-telling, Silko thereby makes a semiotics of subjectification available as analyzed in Félix Guattari's *The Three Ecologies*. In the latter essay, Guattari lays out how an *Integrated World Capitalism* (IWC) structures three different registers: the environment, social relations, and human subjectivity. For him, it is impossible to separate these registers, since they are intertwined and permanently interact with one another. In a similar vein, Silko shows how colonialism is a way of doing things, rather than an autonomous ideological realm that belongs to the past. Colonialism is a lived reality in which affected and affecting embodiment centrally perpetuates ongoing forms of economic, environmental and psychic exploitation. Subjectivity can thus be seen as the bodily enactment of cultural imaginaries that are fundamentally influenced by a semiotics of difference induced by, as we could say with Guattari, an *Integrated World Capitalism*. In Silko's novel, this *Integrated World Capitalism* is, at the same time, relying on ongoing colonial power-relations and an internal colonialism within nation states. Embodied, lived, and socially stratified difference being mediated by affective economies is the outcome of not only personal, but structural, not only individual, but institutional oppression.

In *Almanac of the Dead*, it is the set-up of characters that make available how forms of subjectification need to be scrutinized transversally as an interplay of economic, social, and subjective layers. This reading is made accessible by Silko's creation of almost flat characters that seem to act according to their mythical belonging. The actions of these characters literally exemplify the workings of a continuous colonialism. Some of the depicted characters are destroyers, who are said to feed off "energy released by destruction" and who "delight in blood" (*Almanac* 336). An example of such a destroyer is the minor character Trigg, who illustrates most concretely the destroyer's desire for blood and flesh. This is due to Trigg selling blood, plasma, and so-called biomaterials. Biomaterials are, in Trigg's own words, "the industry's preferred term for fetal-brain material, human kidneys, heart and lungs, cornea for eye-transplants, and human skin for burn victims" (*Almanac* 398). In contrast to this illustrative use of character, Silko develops a complex understanding of time. The time-span depicted in the novel is allegorized and characterized as being the epoch of the Death-Eye-Dog.¹ Death-Eye Dog as an allegory provides what characterizes its time, an epoch that began with the invaders, white settlers colonializing the Americas more than 500 years ago. Silko's criticism of the depicted epoch of the Death-Eye Dog is sharp: in such an epoch,

1 Silko's employment of time is directly derived from the Mayans. As Silko states in an interview: "The Mayan people were obsessed with time and knowing each day. They believe that a day was a kind of being and it had a . . . we would maybe say a personality" (105, quoted in Sol 26). This means that time-spans have characteristics, characteristics that are allegorically embodied by creatures like Death-Eye Dog. As Adam Sol has pointed out, creatures like Death Eye Dog represent their time in a spiritual, rather than physical fashion (see 26).

“human beings, especially the alien invaders, would become obsessed with hungers and impulses commonly seen in wild dogs” (Almanac 251). These alien invaders are human beings “attracted to and excited by death and the sight of blood and suffering” (475, quoted in Sol 36). To overcome the reign of Death-Eye Dog, the wretched of the earth arise, seeking as Silko tells us “nothing less than the retaking of all tribal land” (Almanac, n.p.).

Silko embeds her characters in a web of descriptions that show a continuity of colonialism's culture. This continuity of colonialism is affecting the characters' behavior and thoughts, so that some, like the destroyer Trigg, are captured by its logic and succumb to it, turning themselves into protagonists devoid of compassion or connectedness. In conclusion, I surmise that Silko gives her readers a glimmer of hope that the depicted conditions can be overcome. Trigg's employee, the Vietnam veteran Roy, sees through Trigg's scheming, reads his notes, and becomes his secret antagonist. Even before his employment, he has decided to organize an army of the homeless, to take over vacant buildings and government land (see 410). Roy's knowledge on human mortality leads to a different situatedness within the world and makes him to the exact opposite of what Trigg is standing for. While Trigg takes from the poor, Roy wants to organize them and organize for them, for instance housing. For Trigg, it is death that allows him to feel as a survivor, for Roy it is survival that reminds him of his mortality. While Trigg lives on blood, Roy tells the crazy homeless who are not admitted in Trigg's blood and plasma center to keep their blood: it is blood that makes them strong, he lets them know.

Ultimately, Roy as a contrasting character allows us to pose the question if it is possible to escape semiotics of subjectification that feed into continuous colonial relations. I argue that in *Almanac of the Dead*, Silko answers this question in the positive. This is the case because in Silko's literary world, a semiotics of subjectification – that feeds into domination, exploitation, and violence – is far from being all-encompassing. In *Almanac of the Dead*, Silko not only shows how the destroyers embody and enact social conditions that will ruin human beings and their surroundings alike; she also makes available how one can affect and be affected in ways that oppose the threat of destruction as presented by the destroyers' deeds. There are destroyers, but there are also those like Roy who oppose their forces and set out to create redemption from violence and dispossession. These are characters that are shown to live according to different sets of values, who embody sensibilities and desires that have not been captured by capitalist machine. Ultimately, *Almanac of the Dead* records, too, the stories of those who have been warned about the destroyers, and who know how to read the signs of their arrival. Their agency is, however, brought about by the possibilities of communal consciousness. As Roy's friend Clinton lectures him, “African and other tribal people had shared food and wealth in common for thousands of years before the white man Marx came along and stole their ideas for his 'communes' and collective farms” (407). And while Marxism is rejected as an alternative model for living together, indigenous models of being in the world are evaluated highly. *Almanac of the Dead's* story makes available to us that these indigenous ontological understandings have been there all along. The novel thereby provides us with alternative epistemologies that enrich the imagination with new visions of the future. It opens up possibilities that go beyond the destroyers' deeds of bleak

capitalist-colonialist domination. This opening up of the future, this creation of alternatives lets the novel converge well with Guattari's ethos and goal. Ultimately, the novel itself becomes a semiotic machine able to evoke imaginings which allows to keep "words, phrases, and gestures of human solidarity" (Guattari 29) that are threatened to be extinct by the relentless actions of destructive forces.

The destroyers' opponents in the endings grand showdown will gather in a tacky congress center. These include the twin sisters Lecha and Zeta, the drug pusher Mosca, the revolutionary La Escapia, and the Barefoot Hopi, who all meet at the International Holistic Healer Convention in Tuscon to, hopefully, combine forces. While remaining in the dark whether the opposing protagonists will be able to overthrow the destroyers, at this point Silko's narrative method is more than clear. As Meredith Tax comments, it is its "alternating currents of irony and crackpot occultism, pity and disgust, common sense and messianic vision" that show Silko's intention, namely to suck readers "in only to tip them off balance, the purpose being not to make them identify but to make them think" (Tax 61). Although Silko's depiction of her characters does not allow for any easy identification, she nevertheless invites her readers to share the hope that Death Eye Dog and his seven brothers can be overcome. The destroyers' deeds are paralleled by heroic events brought about by those who oppose them. To be affected by this hope is the novel's ultimate goal.

References

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