Exploring the World of the Different in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*

Michelle Jarman
University of Illinois at Chicago

> A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the "normal."
>
> Gloria Anzaldùa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*

Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* dramatically brings to life Gloria Anzaldùa's layered description of the indeterminate, unfixed nature of the borderlands. Silko situates her dystopic, chaotic novel in the contested locations straddling national, ethnic, corporeal, and ideological boundaries. Much of the theoretical engagement with border texts such as *Almanac* has drawn from Anzaldùa's framework to focus upon the hybrid nature of social and individual identities as a means of investigating the liminal spaces of *la frontera*. José David Saldívar, for example, suggests that understanding culture in terms of "material hybridity, not purity" allows writers and critics to reposition the nation-state as a site within many diverse and intersecting "cognitive maps" (19) rather than as the center of cultural identity. Such cognitive

remapping is certainly part of Silko's project in this novel. Through a narrative foregrounding of the histories of indigenous people who consider the US-Mexican border to be illegitimate—especially after the broken promises of Guadalupe Hidalgo—she attempts to destabilize what she calls the "nation-state fiction" (Coltelli 123) of cohesive national perspectives and identities.

However, even as *Almanac of the Dead* reworks familiar themes taken up by other borderland writers, Silko is intent upon interrogating the limits and exposing the dangers of romanticizing indigenous or ethnic authenticity. Specifically, this essay explores how Silko deploys disability and queer identities to complicate authenticity in two important ways: first, to expand borderland notions of hybrid identity; and second, to ironically expose the cultural erasures of eugenic histories connected to homosexuality and disability—erasures that mirror and complicate current identity politics of border theory.

Silko's novel attempts to push the definitional boundaries of "those who cross over . . . through the confines of the 'normal'" (101). Anzaldùa's pioneering work has been rightly celebrated for giving voice to women whose experience had been too long relegated to the margins of political theory, yet, at the same time, by privileging a lesbian, mestiza consciousness as "a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes" (101), another form of exclusivity was immediately invoked. In addition, because border theory has grown politically out of Chicano and native resistance to dominant Euro-American culture, many critics have used *the borderland/la frontera* as an exclusionary site, where one's ethnicity and ideological stance against assimilation become dues of membership. David Johnson and Scott Michaelsen take issue with border theory's encampment in discourses of inclusion and exclusion because "'resistance' locates the border, cites it between 'us' and 'them.'" They argue that if border theory accepts ethnic authentication coupled with prohibitions around participation, border studies itself begins to serve "another purpose: namely . . . the dream of purity" (18).

Border theory's interest in authentic identity or other forms of social purity mirrors the central tensions within *Almanac of the Dead* and becomes germane to the development of Silko's

overarching cultural critiques. Geographically centered around Tucson, Silko weaves a complex narrative spanning nearly five hundred years, connecting the continents of North and South America, Africa, and Europe. In this postmodern dystopia, more than seventy characters navigate a social context where disproportionate wealth, exploitative sexuality, and corrupt individualism have subsumed community relationships and collective memory. Characters in *Almanac* defined by eugenic thinking combine historical ideas of race betterment, targeted population control, and sexual sterilization with modern medical authority and ruthless capitalism. Through their violent, misanthropic acts, Silko suggest that this philosophical continuity represents the most destructive aspect of the European intellectual legacy. A doctrine of human purity and disavowal of variation stands as the foundational ideology threatening genocide and cultural erasure.

Against this hegemonic drive toward eugenic purity, Silko positions a heterogeneous worldview that posits variation and an understanding of difference as essential to species and individual survival. Within these two competing evolutionary "logics," the novel makes clear that both perspectives are ideological; in other words, they are not essentialized within either Anglo-European or indigenous bodies. Furthermore, Silko's representations of disabled and queer characters suggest that border subjectivities may develop from experiences of impairment or sexuality as much as from ethnicity or nationality. This is not to say that Silko equates disability or queer identity with anti-eugenic perspectives; to the contrary, these bodily representations often disrupt the assumption that any specific corporeal hybridity guarantees one's ability to understand, accept, or value difference.

However, Silko does not abandon the ideal of greater acceptance. She challenges the causal relationship between ethnic identity and expansive inclusion. Rather than positioning hybridity as personal subjectivity, *Almanac* engages with it as a receptive, fluid way of thinking—as the ultimate contrast to eugenic philosophies of perfection. Through myriad depictions of violence, destruction, and dehumanization, Silko stresses that anyone who adopts a doctrine of human purity participates in a eugenic project,

which always contains a form of erasure—of histories, bodies, or cultures—at its core.

Postmodern Eugenics

Almanac of the Dead presents a relentless critique of the corruption in Anglo-European culture revolving around money, power, sexuality, and a debased phallocentric order. Within this milieu, many of Silko's powerful and wealthy characters draw upon the elitism of eugenic thinking to justify their treatment of indigenous, poor, homeless, or otherwise vulnerable people. As examples, General J., part of a powerful Mexican cadre, is a self-proclaimed scholar of castration and sterilization techniques who proposes to his friends that illegal refugees be "gunned down from the air like coyotes or wolves" (495). His friend Menardo, a disavowed Indian, agrees, and actively disparages his own people as lazy and destructive thieves. Rejecting his indigenous roots, Menardo builds a financial empire by insuring and providing exclusive armed protection to the very wealthiest Mexicans, most of whom are of European descent. Seeing social position and wealth as rightful entitlements of innate superiority, these characters consider monitoring and controlling inferior people—groups they refer to in terms of hordes and masses—as their personal responsibility.

While many characters in *Almanac* are manifestly villainous, this essay focuses upon sinister postmodern eugenic projects enacted by disabled and queer characters Trigg, Beaufrey, and Serlo. In order to contextualize the term postmodern eugenics, I draw from David Harvey's contention that postmodernity would be better understood as a continuity—rather than a discontinuity—of modernity. Harvey argues that while postmodernity has given rise to dramatically different aesthetic, artistic, political, and theoretical forms, these shifts should be thought of as an extension of modernity—as a natural expression of the growing complexity of capitalism.

In its sweeping critiques of the violence and dehumanization emerging in the expanding markets of global capitalism, *Almanac of the Dead* adheres to Harvey's thesis, paying particular attention

to the ways eugenic thinking fluidly adapts across cultures and personal subjectivities to rationalize new borders and enhanced brutality. Within this context, postmodern eugenics refers to the strong historical formations undergirding the new—seemingly discontinuous—eugenic practices within the novel. In many instances, Silko traces the legacies of eugenics to expose its malleability. Notably, the historical stigmatization of queer and disabled people enacted by early eugenicists is effaced in the novel. This erasure does not seem to be accidental, and calls attention to the importance of historical revisionism necessitated by the partnership of destructive capitalism and eugenic ideology. This essay reconstructs the links between Silko's representations and some of the original ideas shaping US eugenics in order to better understand her novel as an exposé of ideological continuity.

Eugenically driven characters Serlo and Beaufrey are wealthy homosexual men of aristocratic European lineage, quintessential "blue bloods" who treat male lovers as expendable, sexual playthings and envision the scientific removal of women from human procreation. Of less aristocratic descent, Trigg believes in the supremacy of genius, science, and capital, and that those who fail within the parameters of his rarified rubric should be sacrificed to satisfy the appetites of the privileged.

As a paraplegic white man, Trigg becomes "adamant about the eventual miracle of medical science . . . for spinal-cord injuries and nerve tissue transplants." In his mind, getting "out of the chair" is only a question of time (380). Connected to his unbending faith in medical science, he sees human biomaterials—organs, blood, skin—as commodities of the future. Ever the opportunistic businessman, Trigg considers the homeless, poor, and drug-addicted clients of his plasma donor centers to be more valuable as raw material than as whole organisms. Following the logic of his self-proclaimed genius, Trigg defines murder as social purification: "These alleged human beings, the filth and scum who pass through the plasma donor center . . . I could do the world a favor . . . and drain them dry" (381).

Trigg's euthanasia "solution" is not simply philosophical; he repeatedly carries out his personal eugenic project. Targeting homeless men and hitchhikers—using his wheelchair to project a non-threatening posture—he brings them to the donor center,

ostensibly offering payment for their plasma, then proceeding to literally "drain them dry." In adherence to the Spencerian model of survival of the fittest, Trigg blames his victims for being such easy prey. Their economic failure within what he sees as the limitless profit-making possibilities of capitalism proves their status as "human debris." Within this worldview, he considers these acts of murder to be his own brilliant transformations of "human refuse" into useful and profitable "harvest[s]" (444) of biomaterials he can market to international biomedical consortiums.

Ironically, the eugenic philosophies Trigg draws upon to brand people expendable would have considered his physical impairment as being a sign of degenerate heredity. While Trigg never claims affiliation with this history, he is driven by eugenic ideas: first, he is obsessed with walking again in order to escape the stigmatized corporeal designation of disabled; second, he single-mindedly focuses upon the removal of those he designates as socially unfit. But, while eugenicists were intent upon establishing the hereditary nature of both genius and degeneracy in order to rationalize the segregation and sterilization of people diagnosed as "feebleminded" or judged "socially inadequate,"[1] Trigg twists this purportedly causal argument even further. From his perspective, the civically responsible act of removing "human debris" (Silko 444) coupled with the financial yield from the sale of viable organs and tissue establish the irrefutability of his worldview. The logic of eugenics becomes solidified by capitalism where human beings serve (and are served up by) the primacy of profit.

Playing the role of villain, Trigg reiterates several problematic disability stereotypes: he resents his injury, and the social, especially sexual, rejections that fuel a general hostility toward others; he obsesses about an eventual cure and his restoration to "wholeness"; and he dissociates from society into self-absorbed delusions of grandeur. Disability studies scholars have developed important critiques of such excessively metaphorical representations. Tobin Siebers, for example, argues that psychological models have scripted people with disabilities as fundamentally narcissistic. Freud's theory of narcissism actually uses physical disability as its quintessential symbol; the damaged body represents the ongoing mental trauma of the body's wound.

Using this model, Freud assumes the failures of people with disabilities result from one primary cause—which Siebers terms "the tender organ" (44). Ironically, having only one source of failure protects disabled people from the excessive uncertainty of human life that might lead to neurosis, yet psychology assumes their physical wounds will envelop them in narcissistic isolation, which is worse. As Siebers explains, "Narcissists are beyond the reach of therapy because they refuse to invest energy in other people. So long as they suffer—and they always suffer—they cease to love" (45).

Trigg embodies this psychology of narcissism by being so obsessed with recording his own history that he becomes unable to substantively relate to the people around him. His attempt to reach out to his lover, for example, reveals to her an intense need to validate his questionable self-interpretations. Couched as a desire for her to understand the "real him," "the man inside," Trigg encourages Leah Blue to read his diaries, "stacked three feet high" (381), which catalogue his thoughts since acquiring a spinal-cord injury. Fitting into Freud's model almost too well, Trigg's journals focus single-mindedly upon sexual exploits and failures—all of which he attributes to his disability. Paul Longmore has compellingly pointed out that disabled characters have been excessively stereotyped as "maladjusted" (70) and "sexually deviant" (72) in literature and film. This depiction has worked to naturalize the idea that while rejection comes from lovers, strangers, and everyday events, the extreme, even criminal, reactions that almost inevitably follow on the part of the disabled character are rightly attributed to deviant psychology.

In *Narrative Prosthesis*, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder argue that disability often functions within narrative as a prosthetic device by providing abstract ideas with material form. Because disabled bodies break the boundaries of the so-called normal body, they provide expanded metaphorical capacity, which too often is constructed as deviance. As Mitchell further explains in a related essay, "Disabled bodies prove undisciplined because they refuse to conform to the controlling narratives of medical or rehabilitative science. In doing so, they are designated as pathological" ("Narrative Prosthesis" 16). Notably, critics outside disability studies persistently interpret disabled figures in this way—as

pathological, deviant, or less than whole. Rather than reading impairment as one of many unique character traits and disability as the myriad social and cultural structures which isolate and oppress, to most contemporary critics, the presence of impairment immediately calls forth grandiose metaphorical meanings. Janet St. Clair's interpretation of Trigg illustrates this critical tendency: "Silko adds even more complexity to the metaphor of loveless, priapically fixated, spiritually impotent Euro-America by creating this character [Trigg] as only half a man." She further states, "paralysis, of course, is an apt metaphor for men who are incapable of feeling" (213). Ironically, in her interpretation of Silko's representation of queer male characters, St. Clair compellingly challenges other critics for engaging in homosexual stereotyping just as she engages in oversimplification in her reductive readings of disability.

Although Trigg does embody many of the problematic metaphorical constructions listed above, I am suggesting that Silko plays upon these exaggerated stereotypes and historical erasures to call attention to the absurdity of his convictions. While early eugenicists positioned social reform agendas around racial superiority, the underlying justification for labeling individuals across racial divides depended upon diagnoses of cognitive or physical impairment. Elizabeth Yukins explains that in order to address the inadequacy within the white race while maintaining the myth of racial superiority, eugenicists stressed genetic weakness instead of racial inferiority: "'degenerate' whites threatened the purity of superior white 'germ plasm,' but they signified genetic flaws rather than a racial type" (167). The diagnosis of impairment was crucial to providing the justification for oppressive (often violent) medical and social intervention.

In his steadfast obliviousness to the eugenic discourse that deployed disabled bodies as evidence of the weakening of the race, Trigg takes on a satirical role reminiscent of Dr. Strangelove, in which he enacts the genocidal agenda of euthanizing bodies—many with impairments like his own. This ironic juxtaposition allows Silko to dissociate what she calls "Destroyer" ideology—endorsed by those "excited by death and the sight of blood and suffering . . . [who] waited for disaster or destruction" (475)—from

specific races, cultures, or bodies. In this way, the belief system itself—not the disabled perpetrator—is exposed as the murderous, inhumane entity.

Similar to Trigg's reiteration of disability stereotypes, Silko's representations of Serlo and Beaufrey also echo problematic tropes of male homosexuality: these men are violently misogynistic; they exploit and discard young men for personal pleasure and amusement; and their actions seem directed by a malicious narcissism. Sexual perversion is not unique to homosexual or disabled characters in *Almanac of the Dead*. Debased sexual fetishes are constitutive elements of "Destroyer" culture. However, Serlo and Beaufrey's willingness to efface or rescript the historical relationship between eugenics and homosexuality underscores Silko's larger argument: that the Euro-American drive to domination depends upon an active cannibalization of its own past.

Serlo and Beaufrey, like Trigg, participate in extreme postmodern eugenic projects. Asserting the primacy of aristocratic lineage and wealth, they believe democratic societies have been "vulgarized" by allowing the "lowest levels of humanity" (541) to amass fortunes and wield political power. Serlo prides himself on being a scholar of eugenics, but repeatedly reconfigures this history in order to validate his exclusively male perspective. Like eugenicists at the turn of the twentieth century, Serlo focuses upon the perpetuation of superior bloodlines (like his own) to achieve his vision of human perfection. However, while "positive eugenics" historically encouraged men and women of "good stock" to have many children, Serlo's postmodern agenda supplants women altogether: "[T]he most perfect genetic specimen could be ruined, absolutely destroyed, by the defects of the child's mother." By removing "the factor of the mother" (542) through technological purification, Serlo intends to achieve the promise of early researchers by eliminating the presence of disability and preventing any psychological wounds of childhood through male parenting.

Silko does not represent Serlo's misogynistic eugenic project as a simplistic effect of homosexuality. Instead she troubles the solidity of homosexual identity itself. Although Serlo primarily associates with Beaufrey and his male lovers, he remains obsessively celibate. Greatly influenced by his grandfather's

assertion that penetration is "silly, unnecessary, and rotten with disease" (546), Serlo protects himself with clinical sterility. His grandfather—who scientifically preserved his semen for use by future generations—provides an important familial legacy that informs the postmodern eugenic projects Serlo develops in his Colombian research institute. First, he establishes extensive sperm banks from which "superior human beings would be developed" with the assistance of an "artificial uterus" (547). Second, his scientists are building Alternative Earth modules—self-sufficient, closed systems designed to orbit above the earth for years, if necessary. Feeding off the oxygen and fuels from earth, his selected few could wait out the chaos of global uprisings, and descend again to assert their rightful positions of power.

Whereas Serlo's futuristic eugenic projects focus on positive action in terms of genetic enhancement, Beaufrey engages in *weeding out* processes reminiscent of "negative eugenics." Convinced his noble blood separates him utterly from "commoners" (Silko 535), Beaufrey treats ordinary people as disposable pawns in his personal game of chess. Thriving on power and profit, Beaufrey produces and sells movies featuring real-life murders, fetal dissections, surgical fantasies, and ritual circumcision. In his personal life, he uses money, drugs, and his social influence to entice and manipulate the people around him, all for his own amusement.

Toying with his current lover, David, Beaufrey ruthlessly manipulates him and everyone in relationship with him. By exploiting the cocaine addiction and emotional vulnerability of David's former lover, Eric, Beaufrey becomes instrumental in his eventual suicide. Then, annoyed by David's love for his infant son, he has the boy kidnapped and (most likely) killed, the emotional shock of which ultimately drives David to his own accidental death. Even David's demise leaves Beaufrey untouched emotionally. His response to seeing David's corpse crushed under the mare he had ran to death is to send ranch hands back for a camera: "David was worth more dead than he had been alive . . . here was what gave free-world trade the edge over all other systems: no sentimentality" (565). Ultimately, human destruction was the goal of Beaufrey's "game": "The idea of the game was to

permit gorgeous young men such as David to misunderstand their importance in the world. Players such as Eric or David . . . were a dime a dozen; Beaufrey was the director . . . the producer." As a dispensable player in Beaufrey's game, David is more "exciting to destroy" (536) than to love.

The eugenic ideology connecting the predatory characters of Trigg, Serlo, and Beaufrey to each other also ironically reiterates the ways eugenic discourse historically blurred the borders between homosexuality and disability, and effectively equated the two in order to reinforce them as stigmatized markers of identity. Havelock Ellis, for example, warned inverts, the scientific term for homosexuals at the time, not to marry because their children would inherit their parental "perversion"—by which he meant both homosexuality and disability. Describing the "disastrous" results of an "otherwise healthy" invert who married in hopes of repressing his homosexuality, Ellis explained: "[T]he offspring turned out disastrously. The eldest child was an epileptic, almost an imbecile, and with strongly marked homosexual impulses; the second and third children were absolute idiots" (335). Because the borderlines of "feeblemindedness" proved endlessly expansive, sexual behavior, inversion, and physical markers of anomaly intersected fluidly to signify hereditary inferiority.

So, while scholars and professionals debated the scientific details of heredity, there was general agreement with the sentiment voiced by medical professor G. Frank Lydston in 1889, "that the sexual pervert is generally a physical aberration" (244). Within this context, which foregrounds homosexuality as symptom and proof of biological flaw, Silko underscores the historical displacement enacted by disabled and homosexual characters asserting themselves as postmodern pioneers of eugenic purity and she forces readers to question the putative "rationale" of cultural projects of human perfection. Even more to the point, Silko attempts to disentangle sexual perversion from specific types of bodies and sexual persuasions, arguing instead that eugenic thinking itself brings forth this insatiable, lustful hunger for power over life and death.

Bodily Contamination and Historical Contagion

Almanac of the Dead further destabilizes the metaphorical solidity of sexual identity by stressing that the pursuit of purity often plays out through repression or rejection of sexuality, a strategy designed to guard oneself from contamination. Serlo's postmodern extension of eugenics revolves around protecting the sanctity of his own bloodline, which he carries out through complete disavowal of intimacy: "Serlo had been ahead of his time with his fetishes of purity and cleanliness; there were insinuations his sex organ touched only sterile, prewarmed stainless steel cylinders used for the artificial insemination of cattle" (547). Beaufrey, on the other hand, actively engages in sex with men, but he also takes great precautions against emotional or sexual contamination from the "rough trade" he brings home: "Beaufrey did not allow himself to be seen or embraced or touched. . . . He had such potent sensitivity he was able to wear one [condom] over another for added safety" (552).

Margrit Shildrick suggests that discourses of contagion engender in people a self-protective detachment from others. In order to confront threats of contamination, Euro-American cultures, for example, have attempted to control "the conditions of vulnerability as though science could settle ontology" (217). While Shildrick does not condemn public health measures aimed at personal protection, she suggests that the discursive imperatives imbedded in "prophylactic strategies" such as vaccinations for children, anti-malarial regimes, and universal safe sex should be interrogated because their focus upon the vulnerabilities of human bodies tends to naturalize a fear of contamination by strangers. Far from being a neutral process of self-protection, Shildrick argues that "what is at stake in our vulnerability to non-self factors is an ethics of relationship" (216).

Almanac takes on this cultural interrogation of the prophylactic with impressive candor, dramatizing how the fear of contagion evokes a fetishization of purity and tends to naturalize difference as absolute separation. Even more insidiously, this mindset provides a moral tolerance for stories of murder, torture, disease, oppression, and suffering as something that happens to *them*, not

us. In even broader terms, within the borderlands of *Almanac*, Silko suggests that the contemporary criminalization of refugees, policing of national boundaries, and systemic suspicion of "foreigners" all represent "prophylactic strategies" of a culture defending against contamination.

The imminent contagion threatening the privileged and powerful members of Silko's Destroyer culture, however, is not only disease or disability, as early eugenicists would have predicted. The privileged and powerful neo-eugenicists inhabiting the borderlands of Silko's text enact their "prophylactic strategies" against a contamination of the psyche, brought on by a reckoning with their own history. Within the fabric of *Almanac*, several resistance movements challenging historical and cultural erasures gather momentum against European "invader" cultures. A large uprising of Indians led by twin brothers Tacho and el Feo coalesces in the Mexican mountains; Vietnam veterans Rambo Roy and Clinton assemble an army of homeless men in the backstreets of Tucson; and indigenous spiritual leaders try to organize uprisings across the United States.

These stories counterbalance the erasure of non-dominant narratives by reinstating lost histories. The main cultural project of the novel—that of preserving indigenous ancient almanacs—is primarily one of historical restoration. Twin sisters Lecha and Zeta, who are entrusted with the almanacs by their Indian grandmother Yoeme, have the task of deciphering encoded entries and filling in passages that have been lost. The ancient notebooks contain remnants of original pages, later coded narratives, painted glyphs, clippings from farmer's almanacs, and scribbles from keepers over many generations. For Lecha and Zeta, these pieces represent a living history, and the process of completing older sections and integrating current stories into the histories is essential to connecting the broken lines from the past with the future.

Within the almanacs, the catalogues of Indian massacres, slave uprisings, and other historical reclamations lay a great burden at the feet of white Europeans, yet Silko also has criticisms for indigenous people and their ancestors as well. The twin sisters' grandmother Yoeme alleges that Montezuma and the Aztecs were equal to Cortés and the Europeans in "blood worship": "Those who worshiped destruction and blood secretly knew one another" (570).

The genocide that occurred in the Americas could not have been possible without cross-cultural collusion. The almanac stories mirror the panoply of narratives coexisting in the novel itself in that no one emerges from the text unscathed or without guilt.

In his reading of *Almanac of the Dead*, David Moore suggests that the contrast between Destroyer and non-Destroyer cultures reflect distinctions between voyeurism and witnessing. In a fragmented, history-less culture, narratives depend upon voyeuristic devices such as photographic images, videotapes, and objects uprooted from their contextual frames. Beaufrey's photo shoot of David's corpse and Trigg's marketing of body parts illustrate the tendency of Destroyer culture to obliterate its historical referents. By contrast, witnessing contains an almost ritualistic component, demanding self-reflection and an awareness of one's contextualized, historical location. This framework of witnessing is important to Silko's articulation of an oppositional perspective to Destroyer culture. On a philosophical level, witnessing is central to Silko's development of a counter-eugenic theory of evolution, a theory voiced within the novel by Calabazas, an old-time Yaqui-Mexican drug smuggler in a conversation with his comrades, Mosca and Root. On the individual level, witnessing provides a context for understanding the complex internal transition made by Root in negotiating his personal identity in terms of disability. Silko's development of a heterogeneous theory of evolution through a provocative critique of disability oppression suggests that disability itself represents a potential cultural perspective of understanding and integrating hybridity.

While driving the back trails of the desert to a drop-off site, Root's casual comment that one "dull gray boulder looked identical" to every other elicits a strident lecture from his boss. Calabazas immediately stops the truck, demanding that Root and Mosca get out to look more closely at the rocks. "I get mad when I hear the word *identical*," he says, "There is no such thing. Nowhere. At no time" (201). Species survival depends upon difference, Calabazas explains, but equally important to the existence of variation is one's ability to discern and appreciate diversity: "Survival had depended on differences. Not just the differences in the terrain that gave the desert traveler critical

information about traces of water or grass for his animals, but the sheer varieties of plants and bugs and animals" (202).

Calabazas's philosophy becomes an important contextual backdrop to Root's concurrent internal narrative describing how his impairment transformed him from an ordinary man into a literal *embodiment* of human variation. Root's brain injury from a near fatal motorcycle accident years before manifests itself physically by "dragging a foot and slurring words" (203)—anomalies his own family members continue to experience as incomprehensible and repellent. Through Root, Silko suggests that disability might allow one to cross into another form of consciousness, even an alternative cultural identity. After his accident, Root begins to reject his Caucasian identity and to question the presumptions associated with it. When he wakes up from his coma, family members begin to treat him as a stranger. His father tries to joke away the discomfort, but Root knows instinctively that he "had not wanted a son who limped or sounded like a retard" (621). This rejection demonstrates his family's need for normalcy and exposes to Root the larger cultural phenomenon in which he had been an unwitting and uncritical participant:

> Root had learned a lot about his family and about white people when he [awoke from his coma]. They were afraid when they looked at him. . . . They would have been happier if they had buried him. What was Caucasian was perfect, and Root's skull and brain were no longer perfect. (621)

Silko suggests that embarking upon self-reflective identity formation is one of the few avenues *through* Destroyer culture to an alternative perspective which seeks out and allows the strange, the unknown, and the different. In Root's case, his brain injury suddenly allows him to see his family from an outsider position, a location that also forces him to admit his former participation in their tacit discrimination. Coming to terms with his complicity provides him with an opportunity to choose to reformulate his identity in repudiation of this privilege.

Root's sudden onset of disability and his family's misrecognition of him actually propel him to rescript his ethnic affiliation. Although Root had Mexican cousins on his

grandfather's side of the family, his mother had always claimed a primarily white identity for herself and her children. After his accident, Root feels least comfortable around his mother's selected family members and other white people because they seem most uncomfortable with his impairment. As Mosca puts it, white people seem to have an "irrational" fear of disability, as if "another person's bad luck is contagious" (203). The changed reaction others have to Root's disability allows him access to the inhospitable nature of the cultural system he used to claim. Through this new experience of embodiment, Root reformulates his political identity into one of cultural witnessing and resistance. In a sense, Silko adopts a disability studies methodology by exposing and critiquing hostile cultural and familial responses to the onset of disability. In Root's case, his family adopts an ideological eugenic stance of rejecting variation, in effect curtailing his continued participation within the group. Realizing his family's undisturbed cohesion depends upon his own removal, he initiates a process of physical and emotional exile that dismantles and reconstructs his notions of identity and collective affiliation.

Silko's choice to represent brain injury is important because this impairment necessarily involves a cognitive restructuring of the self. Disability studies scholar Mark Sherry suggests that people with brain injury sit on interesting borders around disability identity because of the invisible, variable, and unpredictable nature of the impairment. This type of borderland identity connects with Trinh Minh-ha's postcolonial argument that multiple identity boundaries produce non-standard knowledge. "This shuttling in-between frontiers," she states, "is a working out of and an appeal to another sensibility, another consciousness of the condition of marginality: that in which marginality is the condition of the center" (216).

In Root's movement between frontiers, he realizes that Calabazas and Mosca have no expectation of "what white people might call 'normal' or 'standard'" (201). Without a concept of normal, and with no need to impose such an ideal, his marginal(ized) identity becomes the source of his connection to this new community and to a more fluid individuality. In the truck,

then, as Calabazas continues to explain the essence of survival, Root understands that familial social rejection—and his embodied experience of difference—has provided him with greater clarity about human variation: "Because if you weren't born white, you were forced to see differences; or if you weren't born what they called normal, or if you got injured, then you were left to explore the world of the different" (202-203).

This sense of change is crucial to survival. Brain injury may leave a person's intellectual capacity unimpaired, even though motor skills may be significantly altered. This is Root's experience of his own injury, which explains the fact that although he has changed physically, he remains acutely aware of the meaning behind people's changed responses to him. The before and after nature of the social construction of the self and the process of othering, then, is not lost on Root. An awareness of his unique corporeal experience, combined with the social stigma associated with disability, allows Root to fully digest Calabazas' final pronouncement: "Those who can't learn to appreciate the world's differences won't make it. They'll die" (203). This statement is a cornerstone of the novel. *Almanac* suggests that shifting identities are an elemental product of an impermanent world. Within this context, only a commitment to difference, an imperative to adaptation, and a revolutionary demand for diversity—in other words, only an anti-eugenic framework—will allow a productive form of evolutionary agency.

Embodied Dissent

In looking at the intersections of queer theory and disability studies, Robert McRuer and Abby Wilkerson suggest that dissent is a foundational component of personal identity: "We argue that crips and queers should insist both on teaching straight culture the lessons they have learned from dissent and on understanding dissent as a central component of progressive political agency generally" (10). The social and political terrain of queers and crips can certainly be considered a borderland of sorts. If one thinks of embodied dissent as a form of witnessing one's personal and political identity within this liminal landscape, it becomes apparent that this process of hybrid identity suggests a common ground

based upon a broad range of variation rather than an exacting ideal of perfection.

S. Naomi Finkelstein captures this borderland experience in describing her own intersectionality as both a butch lesbian and a disabled woman. After years of radical dissent as a lesbian within a heterosexist social context, Finkelstein had constructed her identity upon physical strength and the performance of masculinity. However, an even greater form of borderland crossing occurs for her when she is diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. Initially, she desperately tries to overcome the disease, but ultimately MS compels her to redefine herself: "My butchness still resides in my body, but it also resides elsewhere . . . my body has become a site of resistance" (313). She explains that accepting her disability requires her to reject the socially imposed stigma she has internalized about her disease: "When I stopped believing I was disposable because I had lost some abilities and understood that life is not valued that way except by a corrupt society that commodifies its members as objects to exploit, I was a step closer to real liberation" (318). Finally Finkelstein rejects the notion that the loss of corporeal function means a loss of personal value. This psychological protest allows her to achieve a wider critique of the social context that would have her believe in her own worthlessness.

Finkelstein's resistance provides a lived experience of the embodied dissent Silko champions. Throughout *Almanac*, Silko protests the corrupt mechanisms by which capitalism—bolstered by the philosophical eugenic impulse to hierarchize human worth—commodifies and disposes of bodies. In a 1995 interview, Silko outlines her critique of capitalism's negation of the body: "Capitalism is about the bottom line. Right now we have discussions about health care in the US . . . and somebody pointed out that it is cheaper if someone dies than if he lives" (Irmer and Schmidt 159). Grounded in an ideology of disposable bodies, capitalism's logic looks at life and death in terms of material cost, not in terms of community understanding, hybrid insight, or relational value.

Silko's counternarrative dismantles such reductive definitions of corporeal value. Her development of embodied dissent in the

character of Root and other revolutionaries corresponds to the practices of freedom espoused by McRuer and Wilkerson, "practices that would work to realize a world of multiple (desiring and desirable) corporealities interacting in nonexploitative ways" (14). Mosca's engagement with Root's impairments provides a template for such interaction. Fascinated by the details of Root's accident, when they pass near the intersection where it happened, Mosca "repeats Root's story lovingly" (204). With each slightly different version, Mosca tries to uncover more of the meaning behind why the green Plymouth station wagon hit Root's motorcycle. Most importantly, each reiteration contains the assumption that Root's injury changed him profoundly, giving him hidden insights inaccessible to other people.

On a more global level, Silko engages in a powerful dissent against the enforcement of national boundaries that deny people the right to immigrate. In an interview with Laura Coltelli, Silko suggests that "to be a refugee is part of the human condition, and the urge to migrate, to flee, is stronger than the urge to reproduce. . . . To be human is to have the potential of becoming a temporary or even permanent refugee" (123). Crossing national borders is a larger contextual frame for the psychological transition inherent in the borderlands of ethnicity, sexuality, and disability. For Silko, criminalizing immigration solidifies perceptions of absolute difference, and disallows the relational possibilities represented by an influx of strangers. Border crossing can be a dynamic physical, material process as well as a psychological journey.

But to Silko, the most important borderland is the terrain between Destroyer culture and a culture committed to the infinite variation of life. Free migration from one to the other requires personal dissent from an ideology that parcels out bodies as objects and ranks human value on scales of superior and inferior worth. Developing a borderland identity of this kind demands radical witnessing to any complicity in personal and cultural practices of dehumanization. Silko suggests that through dissent, the discomfort of owning one's own involvement, and greater collective awareness, a groundwork of ethical relationships might be established. As resistance organizer Clinton underscores, though, this new formation demands participation across

traditional identity divides: "Nothing could be black only or brown only or white only anymore. . . . This was the last chance the people had against the Destroyers, and they would never prevail if they did not work together as a common force" (747).

Borderlands are productive sites for learning about discrete forms of cognitive mapping and collective forms of power dynamics. *Almanac of the Dead* expands the conceptual ground for borderland identity, suggesting that many forms of decentralized knowledge might function to engender hybrid identity. For Silko, however, hybridity does not guarantee one's ability to tolerate ambiguity or difference; in other words, mixed blood does not trump blue blood. Understanding multiple, intersecting histories and appreciating different races, sexualities, embodied experiences, and cognitive processes contribute substantially to a more life-sustaining worldview. Exploring the world of the different, to Silko, stands against eugenic arguments for racial and bodily purity. While Silko does not provide utopian answers to what this process entails, she makes it clear that personal and collective dissent, self-witnessing, and historical reclamation are important evolutionary forces. Such practices provide the potential for identity mutation and challenge the rigid and dangerous belief systems put in place by fantasies of progress based upon human purity and perfection.

Notes

I would like to acknowledge David Mitchell, Sharon Snyder, Mark Sherry, Nicole Markotic, Lennard Davis, and Sara Vogt for their valuable suggestions and encouragement with this essay.

1. The term "feebleminded" was considered a scientific term by US eugenicists, and used to refer to a whole range of cognitive impairments, from "idiocy," and "imbecility," to moronism (all these terms were also the accepted scientific terms during the early part of the twentieth century). Because "feebleminded" also functioned as a catch-all term for socially undesirable traits, leading eugenicist Harry Laughlin suggested using "socially inadequate classes" to distinguish between "useful" and "non-useful" members of society. This included the poor, people with disabilities, alcoholics, people with diseases, the unemployed, and those with any other negative aesthetic or behavioral marker of difference (17). Laughlin's term seems an important precursor to Trigg's "human debris."

Works Cited

Anzaldùa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza.* 2nd ed. San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1999.

Arnold, Ellen L., ed. *Conversations with Leslie Marmon Silko*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2000.

Barnett, Louise K., and James L. Thorson. *Leslie Marmon Silko: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1999.

Coltelli, Laura. "*Almanac of the Dead*: An Interview with Leslie Marmon Silko." Arnold 119-34.

Ellis, Havelock. *Sexual Inversion*. 1901. Philadelphia: F.A. Davis, 1928.

Finkelstein, S. Naomi. "The Only Thing You Have To Do Is Live." *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies*. 9.1-2 (2003): 307-19.

Harvey, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Cambridge, UK: Blackwell. 1990.

Irmer, Thomas, and Matthias Schmidt. "An Interview with Leslie Marmon Silko." Arnold 146-61.

Johnson, David, and Scott Michaelsen. *Border Theory: The Limits of Cultural Politics*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997.

Laughlin, Harry H. "The Scope of the Committee's Work." *Eugenics Record Office Bulletin No. 10A: Report of the Committee to Study and to Report on the Best Practical Means of Cutting off the Defective Germ-Plasm in the American Population*. Cold Spring Harbor, NY: Eugenics Record Office, 1914. Eugenics Record Office Archive, Cold Spring Harbor.

Longmore, Paul. "Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People in Television and Motion Pictures." *Social Policy* 16 (1985): 31-37.

Lydston, G. Frank. *Addresses and Essays*. Louisville: Renz & Henry, 1892.

McRuer, Robert, and Abby L. Wilkerson. "Cripping the (Queer) Nation." *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 9.1-2 (2003): 1-23.

Minh-ha, Trinh T. "No Master Territories." *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. Ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. New York: Routledge, 1995. 215-18.

Mitchell, David T. "Narrative Prosthesis and the Materiality of Metaphor." Sharon Snyder, Brueggemann, and Garland-Thomson 15-30.

Mitchell, David T., and Sharon L. Snyder. *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2001.

Moore, David. "Silko's Blood Sacrificee: The Circulating Witness in Almanac of the Dead." Barnett and Thorson 149-83.

Saldívar, José David. *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1997.

St. Clair, Janet. "Cannibal Queers: The Problematics of Metaphor in *Almanac of the Dead*." Barnett and Thorson 207-21.

Sherry, Mark. Personal interview. 14 December 2003.

Shildrick, Margrit. "Becoming Vulnerable: Contagious Encounters and the Ethics of Risk." *Journal of Medical Humanities* 21.4 (2000): 215-27.

Siebers, Tobin. "Tender Organs, Narcissism, and Identity Politics." Snyder, Brueggemann, and Garland-Thomson 40-55.

Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Almanac of the Dead*. New York: Penguin, 1991.

Snyder, Sharon, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, eds. *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*. New York: MLA, 2002.

Yukins, Elizabeth. "'Feeble-Minded' White Women and the Spectre of Proliferating Perversity in American Eugenics Narratives." *Evolution and Eugenics in American Literature and Culture, 1880-1940: Essays on Ideological Conflict and Complexity*. Ed. Lois Cuddy and Claire Roche. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell UP, 2003. 164-86.