

The Secret to Survival?

Code Narrative in Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*

Ashley Argyle

University of Denver

Abstract

Resumen

Key Words: Leslie Marmon Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, Native American, en/de-code.

Palabras clave: Leslie Marmon Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, Nativo Americano, de-codificar.

Almanac of the Dead, by Leslie Marmon Silko, follows a long line of Native American resistance and survival built into written codes: the Mayan *Popul Vuh*, the Leni Lenape's *Wallum Olum*, Samson Occom, William Apess, Alexander Posey, and Lynn Riggs give us a small sampling, and with the recent literary criticism that has begun to decode these texts we have new interpretations to look at. Jace Weaver, for example, contends that Occom and Apess, contrary to popular readings, are not assimilationist Christians, but that "the intent is clearly subversive" (53), and Craig Womack believes Riggs' work has been mis-read by tendencies to ignore both Native American and gay influences on Riggs. In these studies, we can see similarities with Silko's novel—both provide knowledge of people who live their lives constantly in the presence of W.E.B. Du Bois' 'double consciousness' (8-10), aware that the things they say and do will not be interpreted as meant (this can of course be frustrating or it can be used as a source of

power against the dominant discourse, as in Alexander Posey's Fus Fixico letters). These different levels of secrecy translate into Silko's novel, and are used for many purposes.

The novel combines the past that critics today are reinvestigating with the newness of current Native American works, showing the commonalities between each. One example links to the Mayan texts that Weaver discusses; in entries of Zeta's portion of the almanac there are epistemological explorations of the word 'almanac' followed by: "Madrid, Paris, Dresden: Codices" (Silko 136). Paul Beekman Taylor writes: "the three cities listed in the last item of the entry are current locations of ancient Mayan codices stolen from their indigenous sites to age idly in a foreign land. [...] the names of these places call for reappropriation of both the physical objects and the stories they contain" (45). Thus, within *Almanac*, we not only have an alignment of ancient written traditions, we also have a call for resistance and redress such as writers in the Native tradition have been making for some time,¹ but what is interesting here is that this call comes at multiple levels, from different time periods, and from numerous texts in various languages. A question at issue with all of these writers that needs to be explored in order to understand more completely how cultures exist, thrive (in spite of), or collapse in the presence of a dominant and domineering culture is: what is the relationship between codes and resistance?² *Almanac of the Dead* answers this question in a variety of ways; below I will explore some of them and investigate how those answers inform our outlook on codes, resistance, and the people who enact and are enacted upon by others.

Leslie Marmon Silko's guardian of the ancient almanac stores it in an old wooden ammunition box. This alone is enough to link the almanac with a history of resistance for the audience, but then we have the added connection to the history of resistance that the

almanac itself plays in the course of the journeys from South to North as we cross over the Mexican border multiple times. What is certain, however, even if we didn't pick up on any of this, is that the almanac plays a vital role in the people's lives, as we see in Yoeme's accounting of the almanac's journey north. The survivors of the Butcher discuss their chances of living and the fate of their almanac: some want to give up and die, others want to send the strongest on, with the manuscript. They

argued whether they should send the strongest to make a run for it, or whether they should give up and all simply die together. [...] strong cases were made for their dying together and allowing the almanac to die with them. After all, the almanac was what told them who they were and where they had come from in the stories. Since their kind would no longer be, they argued the manuscript should rightly die with them. Finally [...] The pages were divided four ways. This way, if only one of the children reached safety far in the North, at least one part of the book would be safe. The people knew if even part of their almanac survived, they as a people would return someday. (246)

Ultimately these people decide to do what almost everyone in *Almanac of the Dead* does—resist and survive. Here we see an interconnection between a desire to live in order to ensure the continued existence of the almanac and a belief that if the almanac lives they too will survive as a people. We also see how the danger to the book's existence relates directly to the danger of the people's existence.

For the purposes of this discussion, we can understand code as a message hidden in its method of delivery, whether this delivery is through words, symbols, or even the blue flames of Rose's siblings, the fat on Mosca's body, or the dreams that the characters

in the novel have. Encoding, then, implies that a code has been made of something that was previously un-coded, or the code making process, and decoding, or deciphering, is an explanation of that encoded message, possibly a return to the un-coded state. Words such as translate, transcribe, interpret, and explain are also useful in this sense. In addition to code at the level of words or symbols, within the novel we also have codes working as a motif.

The existence of codes implies the exclusion of others, and as such creates a power structure, the power inherent in secret knowledge. This power resides both in the ability to encode and the ability to decode. Encoding takes knowledge that may formerly have been available to many people and limits that availability, making the encoder unique from others. Also, encoding may involve messages where the intent was always secret, for example, Max's cards.

Decoding likewise creates power structures, where the decoder holds power over those who accept the information. This is because the decoder holds the choice to share the information or not, to act or not, that other people, who do not control the same information, cannot choose but must wait to receive. Theirs is a passive act, while the decoder is ultimately proactive. We see the struggle over who takes that power when we learn of Popa's search for the almanac: "Lecha knew the old whore had been looking for the almanac notebooks. [...] Lecha knew Popa had not found the notebooks because Yoeme had given Lecha the notebooks long before she died. When Popa had confronted Lecha in a great fury, the morning after the funeral, Lecha had only laughed [...Popa] ran after the taxi screaming, 'Thief!'" (584). There is power in being the only one to know what's going on. Lecha holds it over Popa, just as we see later with Awa Gee. He never

enters the eco-terrorists' coded conversation, merely monitors it and makes plans to help. He never informs any of them that he could be of service to them, but we learn that "He had easily deciphered the code. [...]The coded messages with the maps and diagrams outlined procedures for placing explosives to topple the high-voltage towers" (688). Awa Gee surveys the eco-terrorists, and has the power to help or destroy them just through his knowledge of their codes. He never tells them he knows, and thus, in keeping the code encoded (that is, un-interpreted to all save himself), he retains his own (unknown) power over them.

Within the novel there are several types of codes operating as motifs or themes, in addition to the ways in which code operates with text and the notebooks, all of which operate at various levels of encoding and decoding. Earlier, we talked about the decision of resistance and survival that the originators of the almanac made when they sent it and their children North—that they chose what all who are connected to the almanac chose. The resistance of the people connected to the almanac is tied to survival, and giving in means death. But sometimes it is necessary to have appearances that suggest conformity with the dominant discourse. By appearing to be in harmony with the status quo, this allows an unseen subversion to take place, which in turn, leads us to one type of code, a code of subversion/rebellion. Angelita's "Friends of the Indians," for instance: "All sources of 'direct' and 'humanitarian' aid were known to Angelita; one week she would be gone, and the next week she would return, with little Korean vans to transport the village "baseball teams." Her secret had been simple: the world over [...] wanted to be called 'friends of the Indians'" (471). Angelita's baseball teams are the guerilla war units, but she has given the people who donate material such as vans and dynamite what they

want: a vision of a cheerfully integrated and assimilated society, and one that's Americanized at that.

Angelita La Escapía seems to act of her own volition in creating her code, but other people follow codes of prophecy, whether they are previously created codes or codes created in the moment. "*Spirit Snake's Message*" tells the people that the world is about to end (135-36); later, Sterling informs Lecha of the stone snake's arrival: "religious people from many places had brought offerings to the giant snake, but none had understood the meaning of the snake's reappearance; no one had got the message. But when Lecha had told Zeta, they had both got tears in their eyes because old Yoeme had warned them about the cruel years that were to come once the great serpent had returned" (703). The snake's message is one that is decoded for the audience through characters such as Lecha, Zeta and Sterling, who tie this information into the reappearance of the giant stone snake on the Laguna reservation, and the story of Tacho/-Wacah, who talks to the macaw spirit beings. All of these signs serve as indications to prepare for coming changes, where the land will return to the Indians.

Although we, as the reader, may understand or have explained for us the codes of prophecy, the codes of the spirits and death are different, allowing only certain keepers as interpreters, as we see in Clinton's interactions with his elders:

they had sung songs in languages Clinton didn't recognize, and when he had asked the grannies, they said they didn't understand the language either, because it was spirits' language that only the dead or servants of the spirits could understand" (420).

These people must (and do) accept their incomprehension, and accept that other people have that knowledge—people like Lecha and Rose, who has learned how to communicate with her dead brothers and sisters. The code of Lecha's gift runs in dreams, and has forced her to present an encoded image to the rest of the world: a woman with cancer in a wheelchair, a psychic. Not even Zeta, her twin sister, knows the truth of her gift. Right before Lecha announces that the U.S. ambassador to Mexico and his aide are dead, she realizes: "The dream she had had on the plane had been a sort of narrative in code. She had dreamed she was tied and unable to escape. [...] there had come an awareness [...]. She was the torturer. She was the killer" (161). As the reader, we may not really know what this means, we just know this is important to Lecha's development, that it affects her actions later in the scene. We can't interpret it to the same degree she can because we do not have the same placement and connections with the spirit world.

Finally, we have codes of language itself—the necessity of translating between languages, from handwritten journals to typewriters or computers, even separations between sign, signified, and signifier, including the necessity for me to define how I am using encoding, etc. In Silko's text, "it" (often in quotation marks) acts as a euphemism, and a kind of code name, for death, as we see in the passage describing Zeta and Lecha's father's suicide: "He had done 'it' in this room" (123). Likewise, Eric's death receives the same language: "A few months before it happened, Seese had asked Eric if going home for a visit might cheer him up" (56-57). "It" serves to encode death in the text, possibly so we don't know the true meaning immediately, which is Yoeme's reason for the encoding in the almanacs. "It" also leads us in deeper to the organ trade of Bio-Materials, as we find out about Trigg's activities: "when Roy had tried to get Peaches to

talk, she had refused. Trigg had to be very drunk and use a lot of cocaine before he would start talking about 'it.' That had been all that Peaches would say" (443). It is possible that this particular language front appears merely for the "white" world of the novel, which could then lead to other areas of discussion.³

Codes within *Almanac of the Dead* work on many levels—encoding the text itself, the almanac that is presented to us, the characters we meet, as well as various narratives that have become amalgamated into the overarching narrative. Encoding functions as a method of survival against the Destroyers, the oppressors to Silko's pan-Indians, and at the same time, as a threat to that survival through the very nature of its secrecy, causing a constant struggle that mirrors the resistance of the people within the text. Yoeme tells about the transference of the book, and in this story we can see some of the inherent dangers:

A section of one of the notebooks had accidentally been lost right before they were given to me. The woman who had been keeping them explained what the lost section had said, although of course it was all in a code, so that the true meaning would not be immediately clear. She requested that, if possible, at some time in my life I should write down a replacement section. I have thought about it all my life. The problem has been the meaning of the lost section and for me to find a way of replacing it. [...] I am telling you this because you must understand how carefully the old manuscript and its notebooks must be kept. Nothing must be added that was not already there. Only repairs are allowed, and one might live as long as I have and not find a suitable code. (128-29)

Example after example of lost or illegible accounts enter into the almanac. If survival relies on encoding, and the two are linked, how easy it is to lose survival through a loss of the code. Not only through the danger of it being de-coded by the wrong people, but also the danger of it being outright lost, sold, or not deciphered by the people who are its guardians. Through its very mystery, the almanac and its notebooks are threatened with becoming lost to incoherence. This makes the second mode, decoding, essential, as Yoeme illustrates. Indeed, throughout the novel, we see instances of Yoeme's decoding and interpretations, much of which she leaves for Zeta and Lecha to build upon.

Yoeme searches for a suitable code to repair what was lost, but the woman before Yoeme evidently knew what had been lost—why not rewrite the lost section? This is apparently what the children did after they ate the horse parchment that the almanac was originally written on (250). By replacing the lost section with another encoded section, the danger is a double encoding; perhaps Yoeme seeks to avoid this double encoding, and so works to find the meaning of what had been lost before she works on a suitable replacement. And thus, because she has yet to find the meaning, she has yet to find 'a suitable code.' However, oftentimes, suitable codes seem to act in the form of personal stories, as we can see in the fact that the story of the children's journey north has been added to the notebooks, and even Yoeme's own "Day of Deliverance," both of which would seem to go against 'nothing must be added that was not already there,' showing that change is vital to the almanacs. Yoeme's time with the books seems to have been mainly spent in repairing, commenting in the margins, and adding her own story. Lecha, on the other hand, keeps her own notebook which she says "is necessary to understanding the old notebooks Yoeme left behind" (174). In addition to this, Lecha translates the old

books, attempting to find meaning in them and from them. Now, while this may seem in direct contrast with Yoeme's directions of how to handle the old narratives, we also have a sense of urgency—that now is the time for the revolution to begin. Our evidence of this can be seen in multiple “signs” and resurfacings (the cloudy opal and the great stone serpent are only two). For the almanac itself, our signal comes with the gradual assumption by Lecha of the almanac duties:

After she had written it, old Yoeme had demanded to see it, and it was then they realized it was the first entry that had been written in English. [...] Yoeme claimed this was the sign the keepers of the notebooks had always prayed for (130).

Other entries have been made in Yaqui and Spanish, or even the symbols of previous civilizations, so what does the change-over to English signify? Some critics might note that it is the language of the oppressor, however, in Silko's characters we find the broad span of continents and time—which indicate a more thorough oppressor than just the recent ones who speak the English language, but instead includes those who have spoken in these other languages also.

We get hints that at one time the almanac and the notebooks weren't in code, that the people understood what was written in it, but possibly as the needs changed so too did the form it was written in. However, the almanac has had so many keepers and guardians over its time span that an encoding is almost impossible to avoid, even if this were not the intent. We have changes in culture and worldview, changes in personality and language, and all of this is topped off by the span of time and death—present keepers must decipher the meaning of all these changes without past persons to reference. This accounts for

Lecha's views on the code: "There was evidence that substantial portions of the original manuscript had been lost or condensed into odd narratives which operated like codes" (569). This gives us the feeling that perhaps the narrative did not start out in code, however, when we pass into discussion of the almanac in terms of prophecy, all three women (Yoeme, Lecha, and Zeta) speak of transcribing which would seem, in their contextual use, to mean a type of interpretation, but which may just mean the actions of Seese: typing the notes into the typewriter. Yoeme makes the most overt statement of code ("it was all in a code" [128]), and Zeta speaks of "deciphering Yoeme's scrawls in misspelled Spanish" (134) on the Spirit Snake. But Lecha says:

"Those old almanacs don't just tell you when to plant or harvest, they tell you about the days yet to come—drought or flood, plague, civil war or invasion. [...] Once the notebooks are transcribed, I will figure out how to use the old almanac. Then we will foresee the months and years to come—everything"

(137).

However, we always have material such as this:

The great deal of what had accumulated with the almanac fragments had been debris gathered here and there by aged keepers of the almanac after they had gone crazy. A few of the keepers had fallen victim to delusions of various sorts" (569-70).

Do we accept the delusions and craziness as a part of the code of prophecy or do we separate them out from the 'real' stuff of the almanac? Is it possible that these inclusions help to encode the almanac?

This raises the question of just: what is the function of the almanac? How is it being used? Above, Lecha speaks of it as prophecy and a manual for freedom; earlier, the survivors of the Butcher spoke in terms of community records, and we see history even in the way the children's stories are added. The almanac acts as a chronicler of times and events (there is also the idea that as it tells us of the days, the days will come again, so through history it becomes prophecy). It changes with the change of culture, worldview, and keepers. Returning to Lecha's quote: "Without the almanacs, the people would not be able to recognize the days and months yet to come, days and months that would see the people retake the land" (570), if the people are not connected to the almanac, they cannot foresee this reclamation, which is why some people fail (such as Menardo, who rejects any knowledge from his Indian family). People who are connected to the stories within the almanac, such as Yoeme's resistance story, or other traditions of the people, are connected in a way that allows them to survive, while others cannot. This success (where others fail) ultimately leads to a power structure, as we see in the novel with the coming revolution.

As a defense mechanism against being lost to obscurity (possibly in unknown languages), the notebooks must be flexible, changing with the needs of the people they serve. Thus, the almanac works as a living, breathing, ever-changing being; "the almanac had living power" (569), and with that living power comes the ability to influence people's lives, as it acts both as encoder and decoder. The almanac connects to the community through its stories, which have a tremendous effect upon the people who experience them,⁴ as we see with Seese:

I dream all night about pages I typed the day before, except they aren't the pages I've typed, they are pages I *dream*, but when I awake, the dreams feel they are real even though I know they are only dreams. [...] When I sit back down at the keyboard, the real manuscript page reads completely differently than in my dreams (452).

Seese connects to the events and experiences within the notebooks, allowing her to become an interpreter of events that were previously blocked and shut to her.

Later Seese transcribes the passage on the Great Lord Iguana and the Gunadeeyahs, and decoding this passage on homoerotic sacrifice leads Seese subconsciously to her own revelation about Beaufrey and his sacrifice of her child (593-95), allowing her the knowledge she needs to make peace with herself in knowing that she will never see her son again. This knowledge is knowledge that Seese uncovers herself; it is not given to her by Lecha, despite the fact that the two apparently have some sort of agreement (172) on how the older woman can/will help. Lecha's own words question her ability, however, as we see when Seese locates her in Tucson:

One of the chief occupational hazards of clairvoyants and palm readers was to live under siege by the desperately lonely, and those so crazed it was impossible ever to learn what had been lost. [...] 'Anyone who tracks me down doesn't need me. Go find it yourself! (166).

We have to wonder if Seese is so far gone in her pain over the loss of Monte that it is impossible for Lecha to find the child, or provide the answers Seese needs (which may be different from the questions Seese believes she wants answered). Lecha can't give Seese what she thinks she's looking for, but, in giving Seese this assignment, Lecha

has given her a way to be connected to the almanac, which in turn, affects her life and the way she lives it.

In its ability to connect to the people, it also has the ability to help them survive, physically, mentally, and spiritually. We see the physical aspect on the children's journey North:

The children had been told the pages held many forces within them, countless physical and spiritual properties to guide the people and make them strong. [...] 'You see, it had been the almanac that had saved them. The first night, if the eldest had not sacrificed a page from the book, that crippled woman would have murdered them all right then, while the children were weak from hunger and the longer journey' (252-53).

The very act of sacrifice, which is what they were running from with the Gunadeeyahs, grants them their lives because the almanac encompasses and surpasses written and oral traditions and thus continues to live. The crippled woman did not have the connections to community or stories that the children did; she had been abandoned by her people and became what the children saw (253).

The almanac notebooks strengthen the potential for the people to resist by building the community connections (some of which had been torn down because of the Destroyers). Yoeme believes in the power of stories to enact change by themselves. Thus her prison break adds to the power of resistance, helping others to escape, even if they never hear that exact story:

Yoeme had believed power resides within certain stories; this power ensures the story to be retold, and with each retelling a slight but

permanent shift took place. Yoeme's story of her deliverance changed forever the odds against all captives; each time a revolutionist escaped death in one century, two revolutionists escaped certain death in the following century even if they had never heard such an escape story (581).

This is why Yoeme includes her narrative in the almanac. The story itself helps spread resistance, and having it in the notebooks ensures that others will hear of it. Perhaps it even strengthens the will of the people to such a point that we take heart in the conception of the Barefoot Hopi's prison-break plan. This example reinforces the idea that those who have no knowledge of the almanac, or of the stories within it, or even of stories *like* those within it, will not be able to resist as successfully as those who do have connections to the almanac (and traditional ways). This may seem to go against what Yoeme says—that the story helps just by existing and people need not hear it to benefit from it, however, these people who benefit are already connected to the system (of resistance, tradition, community, etc.), while those who cannot benefit have been cut off or cut themselves off (these are people such as Menardo, Root's family, etc.).

Last, the almanac's life-force imparts in the characters and in the audience an ability to share the stories; it allows for interpretation of the stories and people for themselves. A major example of this is the character Sterling, who at the beginning of the novel reads magazines, crime stories, and self-help articles. He is the most literal example of someone cut off from his community, as he has been exiled from his tribal reservation. In the end, however, Sterling is able to reconnect with his community through the stories in the almanac (754). And because of that connection to the almanac and the people surrounding it, he too can interpret the stories and events now: "he knew what the snake's

message was to the people. The snake was looking south, in the direction from which the twin brothers and the people would come" (763). Sterling has his own moment of decoding and revelation. The almanac connects people, sharing the stories of past and present, and through this we have an empowerment of the people who are connected to their community. Through the use of the almanac in the novel, Silko's audience has become connected to the stories and community as well, allowing us the option of empowerment, should we choose to remain true to the community.

The *Almanac of the Dead* shows us the necessity of interpretation for the characters and for the readers, as well as the necessity of applying that information in some way. The characters who are tied to the almanac, through direct contact, or through community connections, are capable of interpreting and decoding the information necessary to their daily lives, whatever that entails and wherever it is pointing them for the days and years that approach in Silko's novel. It is equally important for the reader to take an active role, however. The vignettes of each character seem to act as personal narratives that we must de-code in order to figure out the messages we might take from them. And yet, there is often the presence of a third party in these narratives, making declarations that leave the reader uncertain as to where they came from or who is saying them, as there is no known main narrator for the entire novel. Once again, we are left with a code that we attempt to decipher, but without all the pieces will be inevitably left out by those in the know.

The almanac notebooks are presented to us as a text that is continually changing, being encoded and decoded. It is a living breathing mass that affects the way other people live and make decisions. It also represents the people (at one point it is "what told them

who they were and where they had come from in the stories" (246)); both are encoded. The text is encoded in preparation for a day to come, a day when the people will no longer be encoded. But the people are encoded now, living lives of secrecy, which ultimately must change how their culture, their lives, and their texts function. In the case of those within *Almanac of the Dead* it leads to resistance and survival.

Notes

¹ Another example is also seen in a similar situation with the theft of the stone grandparents.

² In this essay, I intend to focus mainly on code in the Native American context, although there are also code narratives within the "white" world of the novel and these could also shed light on the nature of survival and resistance.

³ These examples are a mere sampling; further study of this idea would no doubt illuminate even more codes in Silko's work.

⁴ This could move us into a discussion of the importance of written and oral narratives, both of which are present in Silko's work, but it is best, given the focus and length of this paper, to stick to one subject only.

Works Cited

- Du Bois, W.E.B.. *The Souls of Black Folk*. 1986. New York: Vintage Books/ The Library of America, 1990.
- Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Almanac of the Dead*. New York: Penguin, 1992.
- Taylor, Paul Beekman. "Silko's Reappropriation of Secrecy." *Leslie Marmon Silko: A Collection of Critics*. Eds. Louise K. Barnett and James L. Thorson. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1999. 23-62.
- Weaver, Jace. *That the People Might Live; Native American Literatures and Native*

American Community. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997.

Womack, Craig. *Red on Red; Native American Literary Separatism*. Minneapolis: U of
Minnesota P, 1999.