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YAQUI CULTURAL CONTINUANCE IN THE U.S.-MEXICO
BORDERLANDS: LESLIE MARMON SILKO'S *ALMANAC OF THE DEAD*

In her recent work, *Elsewhere, Within Here: Immigration, Refugees and the Boundary Event*, Trinh Minh-ha concentrates on the question of geopolitical borders in the pre- and post-9/11 reality, arguing that the more globally interdependent the world becomes, the more heated the debates concerning politics of national homeland security are. Although the idea of the “global village” seems to challenge the existence of any frontiers, the world-wide political arena is, in the critic’s eyes, still dominated by the discourse of “curtailing movements [and] reinforcing borders;”¹ that, as the critic argues, leads to “building new fences, installing more checkpoints, fortifying security zones, setting up gated communities, and worse, sealing an entire nation into restricted areas.”² Analyzing the process of the gradual militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border, accompanied by the dramatically increasing racial profiling of the populations inhabiting, as well as moving across the borderlands, Minh-ha stresses that “the issue of having a wall built is not about the wall, but about putting to use, in the guise of security, a network of what is thought to be the most efficient mechanisms of strangulation, humiliation and domination.”³ The emergence and continuous fortification of the U.S.-Mexico border, she adds, is all the more dangerous since it can be seen as a modern form of colonial control usurped by the governments over the land and the people.

A critique concerning the legitimacy of the U.S.-Mexico border and its impact on the situation of the Indigenous⁴ people living in the border area is at the heart of Leslie

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¹ T. M i n h - h a, *Elsewhere, Within Here: Immigration, Refugees and the Boundary Event*, New York 2011, p. 1.

² Ibidem, p. 1.

³ Ibidem, p. 5.

⁴ Throughout the article I will use the terms “Indigenous,” “Indian,” “Native,” and “tribal” interchangeably, although I am aware that these umbrella categories remain problematic. As many Indian and non-Indian scholars and writers claim, while they accurately point to Indigenous pe-

Marmon Silko's novel, *Almanac of the Dead*. Drawing on the ancient mythologies throughout the Western Hemisphere, Silko creates a complex narrative about the decline of the Western world in the Americas, accompanied by the eventual retaking of the lands by Indigenous people. The pan-tribal revolution launched against the Euro-American power aims at restoring tribal values, strengthening people's bond with the land, and affirming the cultural continuity of Indigenous nations. While the U.S.-Mexico borderlands constitute the core arena of the activities described in the novel, the international border becomes Silko's key symbol to represent the Euro-American domination which, according to the ancient prophecies inscribed in the novel, is coming to an end in the Americas.

Among various examples of the Indigenous struggles for cultural survival is Silko's portrayal of the Yaqui Indian community, living on both sides of the international border, and their efforts to maintain communal bonds and cultural identity. This imaginative portrayal brings to light the influence of the borderland experience on the shape and self-understanding of the contemporary Yaqui community inhabiting the regions of Mexican Sonora and southern Arizona. The subsequent analysis of the novel will therefore focus on Silko's employment of various spatial metaphors to present the modern Yaquis' sense of home and self, informed by various socio-political and cultural circumstances of the borderland experience. As it will be pointed out, Silko's portrayal of the Yaqui characters' strategies of defying Mexican and U.S. territorial land claims points not only to the Yaquis' continuous struggle for their cultural integrity as a people but also stresses the dynamic and adaptive character of Yaqui identity. Eventually, described in the novel, the Yaqui resistance against the Euro-American geopolitical and cultural domination can be seen as a symbolic struggle of all Indigenous people for their cultural continuity across the Americas. Yet to understand the U.S.-Mexico border area imagined by Silko and the reality of the people living and moving across the region, it is worth analyzing the selected elements of the Five Hundred Year Map created by the writer as a preface to the novel.

I. THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDERLAND

Inspired by Navajo sandpainting, Voodoo ritual drawings, and the ancient Maya and Aztec manuscripts, this map represents the imaginative world described by the author. As critics have pointed out, in its form and content the map is a direct response to the history of European colonization and to the subsequent development of Mexico and

ople's common colonial history and political situation, they at the same time obscure the fact of Indigenous diversity.

the United States on Indigenous lands.⁵ Silko's disregard for the Western concept of political borders is manifested by the use of the words "the Americas" in the map's legends. For Silko, the two continents form one, geopolitically undivided "body" – home to Indigenous people. In the matter of the U.S.-Mexico border depicted on the map, there are at least two possible ways of interpreting it. Presented as a perfectly straight, thus unnatural, horizontal line, the geopolitical border becomes caricatured; such portrayal, undermining the cartographic role of the borderline, accounts for the ideological statement inserted in one of the map's legends, namely, that "Native Americans acknowledge no borders; they seek nothing less than the return of all tribal lands."⁶ Yet the central position and the thickness of the line may also be read as Silko's intended strategy to make it explicit that the process of "slicing" the body of the Indigenous land in half is a direct assault on Indigenous people's sovereignty, cultural integrity and identity. This violation is expressed by Chicana/Mexican-American poet, Gloria Anzaldúa, who sees the U.S.-Mexico border as a

1,950 mile-long open wound
 dividing a *pueblo*, a culture,
 running down the length of my body,
 stalking fence rods in my flesh,
 splits me splits me
*me raja me raja*⁷

Comparing the split body of the land to the body of a people/culture and, eventually, of an individual, poetic subject, Anzaldúa points to the gravity of the physical and psychological wound the border has left on the separated nations. Established in 1848, the U.S.-Mexico border divided the region, marking new limits of two politically separate entities. Indigenous and Mexican communities were violently split and put under control of different nation-states. While Mexican citizens were deprived of and forbidden to enter their traditional homelands in the north, communities inhabiting the lands annexed by the U.S. were, to use Anzaldúa's words, brutally "jerked out by the roots, truncated, disemboweled, dispossessed, and separated from [their] identity and [their] history."⁸ Split by the political fence,

⁵ For more information about Silko's critique of the history of European colonial cartography see L. Coltelli, *Almanac of the Dead: an Interview with Leslie Marmon Silko*, in *Conversations with Leslie Marmon Silko*, ed. E.L. Arnold, Jackson 2000, pp. 119–134; E.G. Anderson, *Mobile Homes: Migration and Resistance in American Indian Literature*, in *American Indian Southwest: Context and Dispositions*, Austin 1999, pp. 17–40; S.M. Huhndorf, *Picture Revolution: 'Tribal Internationalism' and the Future of the Americas in Leslie Marmon Silko's Almanac of the Dead*, in *Mapping the Americas: the Transnational Politics of Contemporary Native Culture*, London 2009, pp. 140–171.

⁶ L.M. Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, New York 1991, p. 15.

⁷ G. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: La Frontera. The New Mestiza*, San Francisco 1999, p. 24.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 30. Anzaldúa's use of the present tense in her description of the border can be read as the writer's intention to stress the fact that the consequences of the traumatic split of the land and

Mexican and Indigenous communities were forced to consider their “own kin,” living on the other side of the border, as political “others” who, once they crossed the borderline, became “illegal aliens.”⁹

Defying the U.S.-Mexico border politics, Silko not only subverts the cartographic representation of the border but intentionally shifts the reader’s attention to the movement across the border and in the borderland areas. What the writer indicates by a web of imaginative routes, represented by the dotted lines, is that movement is fundamental to the borderland experience and that, essentially, the border is “incidental to the flow of human and cultural traffic.”¹⁰ Thus filled with routes and names of characters from various cultural backgrounds, the U.S.-Mexico borderland drawn on the map emerges as a contact zone, defined by Mary Louise Pratt as “the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict.”¹¹ The movement represented on the map is therefore indicative of the continuous cultural interactions that have been taking place in the area since ancient, through colonial, to contemporary times. By the same token, it also accounts for the existence of borderland communities as well as identities, shaped by migratory movements in the region. Therefore, as A.L. Kroeber argues, informed by the process of merging of Indigenous and Euro-American influences, the U.S.-Mexican borderland cultures escape any definite classification since they are not merely “pre-Columbian, not Spanish or colonial, not modern Occidental, but some of each.”¹² The result of transculturation¹³ that has been taking place over these centuries is, according to Kroeber, a cultural product that is first and foremost characterized by hybridization.¹⁴

Informed by movement and portrayed as a site “in a constant state of transition,”¹⁵ the world imagined by Silko becomes a symbolic space that celebrates and

the cultures inhabiting the region continue to affect the reality of modern day communities living in and moving across the borderlands.

⁹ L.M. Silko, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native America Life Today*, New York 1996, p. 107.

¹⁰ P. Giles, *The Global Remapping of American Literature*, Princeton 2011, p. 20.

¹¹ M.L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London-New York 1993, p. 6.

¹² A.L. Kroeber, *Anthropology: Culture Patterns and Processes*, New York 1948, pp. 238, 239.

¹³ “Transculturation” is a term originally coined by Cuban sociologist, Fernando Ortiz, who used it to substitute the essentializing notions of assimilation and acculturation of the cultures subjugated to colonial rule. As Mary Louise Pratt argues, characteristic of the contact zone, transculturation is a process in which “subordinate or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture.” Although the dominated people cannot be in full control of the material produced by the colonizer, they nevertheless can determine “what they absorb into their own [culture], and what they use it for.” (M.L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, p. 6).

¹⁴ A.L. Kroeber, *Anthropology: Culture Patterns and Processes*, p. 239.

¹⁵ G. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: La Frontera. The New Mestiza*, p. 25.

validates the dynamic identity of Indigenous communities undergoing a process of transformation in the changing cultural landscape of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. It is therefore not without reason that Yaqui Indians are among the most prominent characters of the novel. As James Cox accurately observes, although politically divided by the border, the Yaquis portrayed by Silko are a culturally-cemented community which derives its identity primarily from the awareness of their “pre-colonial claim to land in the southern part of the U.S. state of Arizona and the northern Mexican state of Sonora.”¹⁶ Additionally, as Kathleen Sands argues, the fact that over the centuries of contact with the non-Native world the Yaquis have remained culturally bonded as a people, reveals their “remarkable versatility and tenacity in sustaining an identifiable culture in the face of overwhelming odds.”¹⁷ The following analysis will therefore concentrate on Silko’s portrayal of the Yaquis’ strategies of maintaining cultural integrity and identity in the U.S.-Mexico border region.

II. NEGOTIATING THE YAQUI SENSE OF HOME AND THE SELF

Analyzing the traditional Native approach to identity formation Silko stresses that the fundamental factor in one’s self-understanding is the awareness that “the people and the land are inseparable.”¹⁸ As she explains further, “In the old days [...] there had been mutual respect for the land that others were actively using. This respect extended to all living beings, especially to the plants and the animals.”¹⁹ The belief that the land was a primary source of Indigenous identity is expressed in tribal oral histories, most importantly, in the stories of the origins, emergence, and migration of the first people. Since storytelling was a means of documenting cultural and historical heritage and transmitting the body of traditional knowledge to successive generations, it shaped both communal and individual identity and affirmed the cultural integrity of a people. This understanding of reality and the self was brutally violated with the arrival of Europeans in the Western Hemisphere. As Acoma Pueblo poet Simon Ortiz claims, the loss of lands under European colonial rule meant also the loss of the systems of Indigenous knowledge connected to the land. In consequence, Indigenous people’s sense of self was severely threatened. In the writer’s opinion, contemporary identity crises among Native people can be attributed to the fact that

¹⁶ J.H. Cox, *The Red Land to the South*, Minneapolis 2012, p. 186.

¹⁷ K.M. Sands, *The Singing Tree: Dynamics of a Yaqui Myth*, “American Quarterly” 1983 (Autumn), Vol. 35, no. 4, p. 358.

¹⁸ L.M. Silko, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native America Life Today*, p. 85.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 85.

they “do not relate consciously, intentionally, or purposely to their land and culture anymore.”²⁰ Therefore, Ortiz argues, the cultural continuity of the Indigenous Americas lies in the people’s understanding and acceptance of the fact that it is through their communal relationship with the land that they continue to exist as a people.

This idea is celebrated in Silko’s portrayal of the Yaqui world in *Almanac of the Dead*. Two places marked on the Five Hundred Year Map – Potam and Tucson – become spatial metaphors used by Silko to envision the Yaquis’ continuous struggle to maintain their cultural identity as a people. The two fictional places refer to actual sites in the U.S.-Mexico border region. Potam Pueblo, situated in the Mexican state of Sonora, is one of the eight villages founded by the Yaquis in the Yaqui River Valley during the period of colonial contact.²¹ It is, therefore, a symbol of the ancient Yaqui homeland which covered the area of contemporary Sonora in Mexico and southern Arizona. Situated on the U.S. side of the border, Tucson is an equally important place in contemporary Yaqui reality. It is home to the Yaqui communities formed by those who fled from Mexico during the Yaqui Wars,²² to escape imprisonment, slavery, and death. In the 19th century the Mexican government attempted to take control of the fertile Yaqui lands as they represented great agricultural potential. Refusing to give up their homeland, the Yaquis fought against the Mexican army that was sent to systematically subjugate the tribe via military force. Many Yaquis fled to Arizona and settled on the outskirts of Tucson. In order to protect their communal bonds and the communities that they had formed within the Tucson area, they asked the American government for federal recognition as a tribe, which they received in 1978.²³ Consequently, Tucson became an officially “granted” home to the American Yaquis.

What the two places marked on Silko’s map may seemingly represent is the politically split and fragmented Yaqui world. Yet in the course of the novel the writer subverts this image, offering a vision of home and self, seen from the Yaqui perspective. The key to understanding Silko’s vision can be found in the writer’s

²⁰ S.B. Brill de Ramírez, *The Burden of Images and the Importance of Land, Culture, and Community*, in *Simon J. Ortiz: a Poetic Legacy of Continuance*, eds. S.B. Brill de Ramírez, E.Z. Lucero, Albuquerque 2009, p. 120.

²¹ According to Edward Spicer, the eight Yaqui pueblos: Potam, Vicam, Cocorit, Bacum, Torim, Huirivis, Rahum, and Belem, were founded by the mid-1700s, or, quite possibly, in the mid-1600s, as a consequence of Yaquis’ interaction with Spanish Jesuits. Converting Yaquis to Christianity, the missionaries encouraged the people to leave their homes, scattered across the Yaqui River area, to form larger, mission-like settlements. E. Spicer, *The Yaquis: a Cultural History*, Tucson 1980, p. 27.

²² The Yaqui Wars were a series of violent conflicts between the Yaquis and the colonial Spanish, and the later Mexican armies, over the Yaqui lands. The first conflicts date back to the colonial period of 1533, while the last battle began in 1927, and lasted until 1929. To read more about the Yaqui Wars see E.H. Spicer, *Cycles of Conquest*, Tucson 1962.

²³ M.K. Downing, *Yaqui Cultural Continuity: a Question of Balance*, “Wicazo Sa Review” 1992 (Spring), Vol. 8, no. 1, p. 94. Nowadays, the two cities with the largest Yaqui population are Tucson and Phoenix, located in the state of Arizona.

book *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*. Ruminating on the cultural integrity of the Old Pasqua Yaqui community – one of the founding Yaqui settlements in Tucson, Silko realizes that their communal identity stems primarily from their understanding that Tucson is part of the Yaqui ancient homeland. The geopolitical border that divides the community is challenged by a natural symbol of homeland, namely, by a network of rivers spread across the border region. As Silko observes:

The Santa Cruz River across Interstate 10 from Old Pasqua flows north out of Mexico past Tucson, to empty into the Gila River, which then flows south. The Santa Cruz flows out of the mountains in Mexico where the Yaqui people still live. Thus Santa Cruz River makes Old Pasqua home and not exile [...] The Yaquis may have had to leave behind their Sonoran mountain strongholds, but they did not leave behind their consciousness of their identity as Yaquis, as a people, as a community. This is where their power as a culture lies: with this shared consciousness of being part of a living community that continues on and on, beyond the death of one or even of many, that continues on the riverbanks of the Santa Cruz after the mountains have been left behind²⁴

In *Almanac* Silko describes the Yaqui bond with their homeland explicitly through stories about the spirits of Yaquis, murdered by the Mexican army, who move across the U.S.-Mexican borderland, heading towards Tucson. Told by Yaqui Indian Calabazas, the stories stress the fact that for the Yaqui people the struggle for land continues in the present, and the borderland area represents a site of this struggle, manifesting itself on a spiritual level. As Calabazas tells his friend Root, the roaming spirits of the murdered Yaquis are reaching Tucson since they believe that the place is still abundant with water, as it had been in the pre-Columbian times.²⁵ Thus, as a destination for the wandering Yaqui ghosts, Tucson is being reclaimed as a spiritual Yaqui homeland, thus a source of their cultural identity.

The image of waters connecting Yaqui people living in the U.S.-Mexican borderlands not only undermines the significance of geopolitical borders, described by Calabazas as “imaginary lines,”²⁶ but also becomes a symbol employed by Silko to define Indigenous Yaqui identity. Referring to the wandering spirits of deceased Yaquis, as well as to Indigenous people’s movement across the U.S.-Mexico border, Silko argues that it is the people’s inherent right to migrate and cross any border since “human beings are natural forces of the earth, just as rivers and winds are natural forces.”²⁷ Thus, portraying people as part of nature, Silko stresses that

²⁴ L.M. Silko, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native America Life Today*, pp. 89–90.

²⁵ In Papago (Tohono O’odham) Indian language the word “tucson” means “[p]lentiful fresh water.” L.M. Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, p. 190. The homeland of Tohono O’odham tribe is the northern Sonora in Mexico and Arizona, U.S.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 216.

²⁷ L.M. Silko, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native America Life Today*, pp. 122–123.

movement and transformation are intrinsic to human existence and define human identity. For the writer, Indigenous identity, like waters, is in flux, in a constant state of transformation. Moreover, the rivers that form the veins in the body of the land are like blood vessels in the human body; by the same token, the flow of waters parallels the flow of blood. Thus, if the human body is seen as a metaphor for the body of a people living and moving across the U.S.-Mexican borderland, the blood flow represents the merging of various races and cultures in the region. This merging, like the sharing of waters, is perceived by Silko as a natural process that leads to the emergence of mixed/hybrid identities which, like the life-saving waters, enliven the human community. Similarly to the river flows that stand for the unity of the body of land, the symbolic blood flows represent the unity of the body of the people. Therefore, Silko's vision of the undivided human community, compared to the unified natural world, challenges the existence of the geopolitical borders splitting the land and the people. It also counteracts the myth of racial purity of blood which shaped the ideology of colonial empires in the Western Hemisphere.

III. CULTURAL CONTINUANCE: TRICKSTER MIXED-BLOOD IDENTITY

The empowering aspect of the mixed-blood identity is celebrated by Silko in the figures of the Cazador twin sisters, Zeta and Lecha. Living on their farm on the outskirts of Tucson, the sisters are politically recognized as American Indians. However, their revolutionary defiance of the border and the Mexican and U.S. land claims manifests that what truly informs their identity is their connection to the ancient Yaqui homeland and their alliance with the Yaqui people and their world-view. Brought up in Potam Pueblo, at the age of 14, Zeta and Lecha are sent to the United States to live with their American father, from whom they inherit the ranch. Although politically separated from their homeland in Mexican Sonora, their bond with the Yaqui people and culture is maintained by their intimate relation with their grandmother, Yoeme. Since in the Indigenous Yaqui language "yoeme" means "a human being," and the plural form – "yoemem" – means "the people,"²⁸ the old woman can be perceived as a representative of the Yaquis' traditional world. As it will be demonstrated in further analysis, it is Yoeme's storytelling and teachings that she passes on to the twin sisters that reunite Zeta and Lecha with the Yaqui community and assert their Indigenous sense of self.

²⁸ K.C. Erickson, "They Will Come from the Other Side of the Sea": *Prophecy, Ethnogenesis, and Agency in Yaqui Narrative*, "The Journal of American Folklore" 2003 (Autumn), Vol. 116, no. 462, p. 478.

It is not without reason that the old woman is described in the novel as “the she-coyote.”²⁹ The coyote is a trickster, a cultural hero at the heart of the Indigenous mythic world. Presented differently in the stories of various Indigenous tribes, be it as a hare, rabbit, spider, stone, or Nanaabozho, to name a few examples, the trickster is, according to Chippewa writer Gerald Vizenor, a compassionate healer and a “comic liberator”³⁰ in Indigenous narratives. As Vizenor argues, transformation, connection with the natural world, humor, healing powers, and most of all, disobeying of the commonly accepted social and cultural norms, are among the fundamental characteristics of trickster dynamics.³¹ Thus, as Claudia Sadowski-Smith observes, if Yoeme is seen as a trickster-coyote, her presence in the borderlands “signifies the dissolution of boundaries and a state of transition and change.”³²

A rebellious leader and a caretaker of her people, Yoeme, like the mythic trickster, defies the geopolitical borders which represent the confinement imposed on the Yaqui people, and on Indigenous communities at large. Her coyote life is devoted to defending the Yaqui homeland and to “sewing together,” thus healing the Yaqui community separated by the political fence. The old woman’s intimate bond with Zeta and Lecha, and the impact of her presence on the girls’ life, are vividly presented in Book Five, titled “The Border.” The sudden appearance of the she-coyote in the sisters’ life reconnects the two girls with the history of their mixed-blood family as well as with the legacy of the Yaqui people that they are descended from. The story of Yoeme’s marriage to the European settler, Guzman, interwoven with the history of Yaqui people’s fight in defense of their homeland, becomes an initiation story for the twins, instilling in them a sense of pride in being Yaqui. Yoeme’s act of cutting down Guzman’s cottonwood trees, from which Yaqui people were hanged by Mexicans, becomes a symbolic act of Yaquis’ fierce resistance to the European and later Mexican domination.³³ Her life-long protection of Yaqui people and her rebellious defiance of the Mexican and U.S. land claims place her in line with Yaqui warriors fighting in defense of their homeland.

Since the twins are Yoeme’s “flesh and blood,”³⁴ through her life story they are instantly reconnected with their Yaqui clanspeople and the history of their armed resistance. Reuniting the girls with the Yaqui world, Yoeme’s narrative provides

²⁹ L.M. Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, p. 114.

³⁰ G. Vizenor, *Trickster Discourse: Comic Holotropes and Language Games*, in *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literature*, ed. G. Vizenor, Norman-London 1993, p. 205.

³¹ G. Vizenor, *The People Named the Chippewa: Narrative Histories*, Minneapolis 1984, pp. 3–4.

³² C. Sadowski-Smith, *Border Fictions: Globalization, Empire, and Writing at the Boundaries of the United States*, Charlottesville 2008, p. 84.

³³ Yoeme’s husband’s surname is Silko’s direct reference to Governor Nuño Beltrán de Guzmán and his nephew, Captain Diego de Guzmán – two conquistadors prominent in the history of the European conquest of the Indigenous continent.

³⁴ L.M. Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, p. 115.

a foundation for Zeta's and Lecha's identity, "sewing" their personal stories with a communal narrative of the Yaqui tribe. This reunion is manifested in Lecha's comparing Yoeme to a coyote, and the twins to her offspring.³⁵ The sisters are therefore also trickster heroines who, in their adulthood, become the rebellious border transgressors and leading figures in the Indigenous revolutionary movement across the Americas. The twins' acceptance of Yoeme's teachings is best manifested in Zeta's anti-government plotting. When criticized for smuggling guns and Indian artifacts across the border, Zeta responds:

The people had been free to go traveling north and south for a thousand years, traveling as they pleased, then suddenly white priests had announced smuggling as a mortal sin because smuggling was stealing from the government [...]. Where were the priest and his Catholic Church when the federal soldiers used Yaqui babies for target practice? Stealing from the "government"? What "government" was that? Mexico City? Washington, D.C.? How could one steal if the government itself was the worst thief?³⁶

The sisters' continuous collaboration with their relatives in Mexico, which later morphs into their open engagement in the pan-tribal revolution, represents the women's tribute paid to their coyote-(grand)mother. It also manifests their understanding that being part of a Yaqui people, they are descendants of generations of Yaqui people who, for centuries, guarded their homeland against foreign domination. Thus, what also informs Zeta's and Lecha's identity is their conscious choice to preserve the Yaqui people's cultural and historical legacy.

The portrayal of Zeta and Lecha as coyotes/tricksters is crucial in yet another aspect. Barbara Babcock, in her essay "A Tolerated Margin of Mess: The Trickster and His Tales Reconsidered," analyzes the role of the trickster with reference to various forms of "marginality and cultural negation" that are depicted in literature.³⁷ She stresses the fundamental role of the trickster's ambiguity in the portrayal of mixedblood characters. Pointing out the features accounting for the trickster's liminal identity, Babcock stresses that tricksters tend "to inhabit crossroads" and "are usually situated between the social cosmos and the other world or chaos;" they also have the ability to "exhibit an independence from and an ignoring of temporal and spatial boundaries."³⁸ These features, Babcock argues, are manifestations of the contradiction and "anomalousness" that are present in human life. Viewing marginalization and mixed-bloodedness as such states of "anomalousness," Babcock argues that the trickster's ambiguous and simultaneously adaptive nature manifests

³⁵ Ibidem, p. 125.

³⁶ Ibidem, p. 133.

³⁷ B. Babcock, "A Tolerated Margin of Mess: The Trickster and His Tales Reconsidered," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* (1975), no. 11.3, p. 148.

³⁸ Ibidem, pp. 159–160.

“the range of powers available to those who play an ‘outsider’ role.”³⁹ Analyzing Gerald Vizenor’s portrayal of mixed-blood characters, Kimberly Blaeser claims that they are modeled on the figure of the trickster since, similarly to the elusive culture hero, mixed-bloods are marginal figures who gravitate between Native and non-Native world, constantly challenging the geopolitical, social, and cultural boundaries.⁴⁰ Their efforts to adapt to and balance between the two worlds represent, according to Blaeser, a process of healing which is at the heart of trickster dynamics.

Described as “coyote years,” Zeta’s and Lecha’s life can be seen as a process of healing the Yaqui community by continuing Yoeme’s legacy. It is manifested by the sisters’ political engagement in the pan-tribal revolution and, even more importantly, by their accepting the obligation given to them by Yoeme to transcribe the ancient Maya almanac. Kept by Yoeme, the almanac refers to the ancient pre-Columbian codices which survived the post-Conquest burning of the Maya libraries by European colonizers. The three extant codices are named after the European cities of Paris, Dresden and Madrid, where they are kept in the libraries as remnants of the ancient past.⁴¹ In her novel, Silko creates a fictional fourth almanac which, in the form of a fragmentary manuscript, is incorporated into the body of the text. Yet, unlike the three documents, “entombed”⁴² in the European institutions, Silko imagines the fourth almanac to be circulating among the Indigenous people, with the stories and prophecies disseminated by the keepers of the book. Similarly to the Maya codices, Silko’s almanac conflates myths and stories concerning the fate of the Americas and Western civilization; it prophesizes the European invasion of the Western Hemisphere, the eventual decline of Euro-American civilization, and the retaking of the land by the Indigenous people, accompanied by the cultural revival of the Indian world.

Kept by Zeta and Lecha on their ranch on the outskirts of Tucson, the almanac is being partially deciphered and transcribed by the sisters, chosen by their grandmother to be its new guardians. The fact that the mixed-blood twins are the current keepers and transcribers of the almanac notebooks is crucial in the understanding of Silko’s vision of the Yaquis’ cultural survival. Obliging the twins to protect and translate the notebooks, the old Yaqui woman makes another step in affirming their cultural identity. By writing down her own story in the almanac, Yoeme instantly connects the twins with the ancient Indian world, rooting their identity narrative in the story of the origins of the Yaqui people, whose memories, like the memories of the Indigenous Americas, are inscribed in the notebooks. Since the almanac prophesizes the continuity of the Indigenous world, the twins,

³⁹ Ibidem, p. 148.

⁴⁰ K.M. Blaeser, *Gerald Vizenor: Writing in the Oral Tradition*, Norman 1996, p. 155.

⁴¹ L.M. Silko, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native America Life Today*, pp.156–158.

⁴² D. Donnelly, *Old and New Notebooks: Almanac of the Dead as Revolutionary Entertainment*, in L.M. Silko, *A Collection of Critical Essays*, eds. L.K. Barnett, J.L. Thorson, Albuquerque 1999, p. 247.

deciphering the texts and spreading the encoded message to the next generations, testify to this survival. The culturally mixed background of the current translators should therefore be read as Silko's statement that hybridization gives testimony to Indigenous people's cultural continuation. The "offspring" of the she-coyote, Zeta and Lecha account for the continuity of the Yaqui people, manifested by the tribe's merging with the non-Yaqui world and adapting to the new socio-political and cultural circumstances. Such merging of "bloods, cultures, and identities" is all the more important, since, according to Louis Owens, it can be interpreted as a form of subverting the racial logic of identity definitions and liberating people "from the masks of fixed cultural identity."⁴³ Thus through Zeta's and Lecha's mixed cultural background, represented metaphorically by the waters that flow across the U.S.-Mexico border, Silko reunites the politically fragmented people into one body of the ever-shifting, borderland culture. In Silko's eyes, the mixed-blood Yaqui experience evinces that what has emerged out of the centuries of Euro-American contact with Indigenous cultures is, above all, a new life, a new blood – the identity that affirms the cultural survival of the Indigenous people. Described by Silko as a story of "One World [of] Many Tribes,"⁴⁴ the almanac becomes a living testimony to the cultural continuity and integrity of the Indigenous world. As Silko writes, "Yoeme and others believed the almanac had a living power within it, a power that would bring all the tribal people of the Americas together."⁴⁵

Placing the Yaqui protagonists at the heart of her novel, Silko uses the history of this tribe's struggles to maintain their integrity as a people in the U.S.-Mexico border region as a symbol of a larger fight taking place in the Americas. The Yaquis' story represents the Indigenous Americas' resistance to the Western forms of domination, confining Indigenous people in the complex geopolitical and cultural borders, thus violating their sovereignty, cultural integrity and identity. Yet, the legacy of the Indigenous people's cultural endurance in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands can also be seen in a broader context. The imaginative region can stand for the contemporary world, internally divided by geopolitical, racial, religious, or gender boundaries, hampering the development of the human community. As Trinh Minh-ha argues, in the era of multicultural alliances and global migrations taking place vis-à-vis the emerging and constantly fortified borders, humanity must change its mind-set to survive as a body of a people. In the critic's eyes, in order for the human community to survive, we must constantly strive to transcend the borders that limit our perception of the world, thus of ourselves. As she claims, our "capacity to transform ourselves and others in the very instance of our daily performances lies in the ability to expand our views and to create new, unexpected relationships among things, events, and

⁴³ L. Owens, *Ecstatic Strategies: Gerald Vizenor's Trickster Narratives*, in *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel*, Norman 1992, p. 243.

⁴⁴ L.M. Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, p. 707.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 569.

people.”⁴⁶ Thus, if Silko’s Yaqui Indigenous world is seen as a symbol of the human community, the survival of the people lies in the understanding and acceptance of the fact that “Indigenous land, culture, and community equals Indigenous being and place. Or Indigenous being and place is land, culture and community.”⁴⁷

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⁴⁶ T. Minh-ha, *Elsewhere, Within Here: Immigration, Refugeesim and the Boundary Event*, p. 125.

⁴⁷ S.J. Ortiz, *Indigenous Language Consciousness: Being, Place, and Sovereignty*, in *Sovereign Bones: New Native American Writing*, ed. E. Gansworth, New York 2007, p. 141.

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Summary

The article analyzes the Yaqui Indians' strategies of maintaining cultural integrity and identity in the U.S.-Mexico borderland portrayed in Leslie Marmon Silko's novel, *Almanac of the Dead*. Drawing on the ancient mythologies throughout the Western Hemisphere, Silko creates a complex narrative about the decline of the Western world in the Americas, accompanied by the eventual retaking of the lands by Indigenous people. The pan-tribal revolution launched against the Euro-American power aims at restoring tribal values, strengthening people's bond with the land, and affirming the cultural continuity of Indigenous nations. While the U.S.-Mexico borderland constitutes the core arena of the activities described in the novel, the international border becomes Silko's key symbol to represent the Euro-American domination which, according to the ancient prophecies inscribed in the novel, is coming to an end in the Americas. Silko's portrayal of the Yaqui Indian community's strategies of defying Mexican and U.S. territorial land claims points not only to the Yaquis' continuous struggle for their cultural integrity as a people but also stresses the dynamic and adaptive character of Yaqui identity. Eventually, the Yaqui resistance against the Euro-American geopolitical and cultural domination can be seen as a symbolic struggle of all Indigenous people for their cultural continuity across the Americas.

Keywords: cultural identity, cultural survival, geopolitical border, tribal homeland, tribal sovereignty, trickster-coyote, U.S.-Mexico borderland, Yaqui Indians

KULTUROWE PRZETRWANIE INDIAN YAQUI NA POGRANICZU MEKSYKAŃSKO-AMERYKAŃSKIM W POWIEŚCI LESLIE MARMON SILKO *ALMANAC OF THE DEAD*

Streszczenie

Artykuł analizuje proces budowania tożsamości i zachowania integralności kulturowej Indian Yaqui na pograniczu amerykańsko-meksykańskim w powieści Leslie Marmon Silko *Almanac of the dead*. Odwołując się do mitologii obu Ameryk, Silko tworzy opowieść o upadku cywilizacji Zachodu oraz

kulturowym odrodzeniu plemion indiańskich zamieszkujących kontynent północnoamerykański. Ukazana w powieści panindiańska rewolta przeciw dominacji Zachodu na ziemiach tubylczych ma na celu przywrócenie wartości indiańskich oraz afirmację kulturowego przetrwania plemiennego świata. Pogranicze amerykańsko-meksykańskie stanowi centrum plemienną rewolucji przedstawionej przez Silko. Granica dzieląca oba kraje staje się symbolem geopolitycznej i kulturowej hegemonii Zachodu dobiegającej końca w obu Amerykach. Obraz walki Indian Yaqui o zachowanie integralności plemienną na terenie pogranicza obu krajów podkreśla dynamiczny i adaptacyjny charakter plemiennych kultur. Jest to także symboliczne ukazanie zmagania narodów indiańskich na kontynencie północnoamerykańskim o prawa do ziem przodków, do samostanowienia o własnej tożsamości oraz do ochrony kultury i tradycji plemiennych we współczesnej Ameryce.

Słowa kluczowe: tożsamość kulturowa, przetrwanie kulturowe, granica geopolityczna, plemienna ojczyzna, suwerenność plemienna, trickster-kojot, pogranicze amerykańsko-meksykańskie, Indianie Yaqui