

Copyright © 2014 Kyoko Matsunaga. All rights reserved. This work may be used, with this notice included, for noncommercial purposes. No copies of this work may be distributed, electronically or otherwise, in whole or in part, without permission from the author.

Leslie Marmon Silko and Nuclear Dissent in the American Southwest

*Kyoko MATSUNAGA**

INTRODUCTION

Two years after the fall of Saigon, the event that marks the end of the Vietnam War, Leslie Marmon Silko published her first novel, *Ceremony* (1977). The novel focuses on Tayo, a Laguna Pueblo man and World War II veteran who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and emotional estrangement at home in New Mexico after his scarring experiences in the Pacific. In that the novel foregrounds the recovery of a traumatized World War II veteran through a series of evolving indigenous ceremonies, the impact of World War II on the text is undeniable; and so too is the impact of the Cold War. In *Ceremony*, while connecting transpacific atomic sites (Hiroshima and Nagasaki) to the American Southwest, Silko expresses her objections to the politics and rhetoric of the Cold War that promoted not only nuclear colonialism in the American Southwest but also American factionalism and expansion that pushed the world toward a nuclear apocalypse.¹

The politics and rhetoric of the Cold War—of which the Vietnam War was one chapter—was supported and reinforced by the discourse of the nuclear arms race and the actual production and use of nuclear weapons.

*Associate Professor, Kobe City University of Foreign Studies

The American Southwest was strategically chosen for such nuclear militarism and industrialism in the early 1940s. During World War II, following the establishment of Los Alamos National Laboratory for the Manhattan Project, known as Project Y, the first detonation of an atom bomb occurred in New Mexico at the Alamogordo Bombing and Gunnery Range (currently known as the White Sands Missile Range) on July 16, 1945. Shortly after the onset of the Cold War, uranium mining began in the Four Corners region, the intersection of New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, and Colorado. This uranium-rich area, called the Grants Uranium Belt, contains two-thirds of US uranium deposits.² Adjacent to the Four Corners area, the state of Nevada has also suffered from US nuclearism. Between 1951 (when nuclear testing started to shift from the Pacific to Nevada) and 1992 (when nuclear testing was suspended indefinitely), the US government conducted more than 928 above-ground and below-ground nuclear tests at the Nevada Test Site.³ More recently, in 2002, Yucca Mountain in the southwestern portion of the Nevada Test Site became the subject of legal disputes after being designated as the nation's only high-level nuclear waste dump by the George W. Bush administration.⁴

When we look into the history of nuclearism in the American Southwest, what soon becomes obvious is the indigenous presence. As environmental sociologist Valerie L. Kuletz points out, nuclear geography overlaps indigenous geography at almost every phase of nuclear production and use. Los Alamos is located near Pueblo lands, and the first atom bomb was detonated near the Mescalero Apache reservation. Since uranium was discovered on Navajo lands in Arizona in 1941, uranium mining and milling has been conducted on land belonging to Navajo, Hopi, Pueblo, and Ute peoples. In the 1950s, the federal government seized lands in Nevada from Western Shoshone and Southern Paiute to use for nuclear experiments, and later for storage of nuclear waste.⁵ The presence of indigenous people in the nuclearized American Southwest is conspicuous; throughout most of the Cold War period, however, indigenous inhabitants were obscured by the "preexisting settler discourse about desert lands as barren wastelands."⁶

Although made invisible, indigenous inhabitants of the American Southwest have witnessed, written about, and spoken out against nuclearization of the region in poetry, essays, and novels. For example, reflecting on his experience as a uranium miner in 1960–61, Simon J. Ortiz, an Acoma Pueblo poet, critiques nuclear exploitation of indigenous people and their lands in *Fight Back: For the Sake of the People, For the Sake of the Land* (1980). Juxtaposing the two conditions of New Mexico as

“homeland” and “a National Sacrifice Area,” Ortiz contextualizes the history of nuclearism in the American Southwest via the longer history of the region’s colonization since the middle of the sixteenth century, when the Spanish conquered Pueblo territory. In *Fight Back*, as the title of the collection suggests, Ortiz resists the colonial discourse that has attempted for centuries to erase the indigenous presence in the American Southwest.⁷

Like Ortiz, Leslie Marmon Silko critiques the destruction caused by nuclearism, referring particularly to colonial experiences in the Southwest. Silko’s first two novels, *Ceremony* and *Almanac of the Dead* (1991), explicitly portray the impact of uranium mining on the territory and people of Laguna Pueblo, while going beyond the colonial experiences of the Southwest to reveal the apocalyptic features of the Cold War era that seemed to place the world forever on the edge of total destruction. Silko does not yield to such forces, however. In this essay, along with attempting to situate Leslie Marmon Silko’s first two novels as literary dissent against the impact and legacy of nuclearism in the American Southwest during the Cold War, I also examine the alternatives she offers as a counternarrative to the predominant Cold War discourse of the time.

I. BREACHING BOUNDS: BARBED-WIRE FENCES AND DISSENT

The protagonist of *Ceremony*, Tayo, is a World War II veteran who undertakes a series of ceremonies to recover from his “illness,” depicted as a consequence of Euro-American colonization of the Southwest and his military service in the Pacific. To aid in his recovery, Tayo engages in various types of rituals including a scalp ceremony performed by a traditional Laguna medicine man, Ku’oosh, and a sandpainting ceremony conducted by a “mixedblood” medicine man, Betonie. Tayo’s ceremony—his healing—includes a quest involving a search for lost cattle and encountering Ts’eh, a mysterious and mythic woman, who empowers him to return to the Laguna community. Essential for Tayo’s ceremony to succeed is his recognizing the pattern of destruction: how the production and use of nuclear weapons in the American Southwest is part of larger colonial forces in the Nuclear Age.

Around the end of the novel, just before Tayo comes to this realization, he witnesses the devastating impact uranium mining operations had on the Cebolleta land grant (located northeast of Pagate, New Mexico) on Laguna land. As described in the novel, the US government did not tell “what kind of mineral” they were looking for but paid \$5,000 to the land-grant association so they could drill test holes in secret.⁸ The area had been

damaged previously by overgrazing and erosion after the northeastern portion of the grant was seized by the territorial government of New Mexico. As the project progressed, the mining operation at the Cebolleta land grant led to further ecological deterioration, causing floods and exacerbating land erosion. The operation profited the US government and the mining corporations while leaving nothing for the community and the land but “barbed-wire fences,” a “watchman’s shack,” a “hole in the earth,” and the death of “the last bony cattle.”⁹

This is a realistic depiction of the nuclear colonization of the Southwest and the legacy of exploitation, particularly the destruction of regional culture, socioeconomic structures, and the environment. A brief history of uranium mining operations in Laguna Pueblo from the 1950s to the early 1980s confirms this. Following the “discovery” of uranium deposits near Pagate on November 8, 1951, Laguna leaders leased approximately 7,000 acres of 418,000 total acres of Laguna Pueblo land to the Anaconda Corporation. Between 1952 and 1981, Anaconda retrieved 22 million tons of uranium ore from nine underground mines and three open pits, one of which is the Jackpile-Pagate mine, once the world’s largest open-pit uranium mine. The tribe received royalties in exchange for its leases to mining operations (although payments were less than 1% of the total profits made by Anaconda and, later, Atlantic Richfield), and many Laguna residents worked as miners, which dropped the pueblo’s unemployment from around 70 percent before the mine to 20 percent.¹⁰ As Ward Churchill and Winona LaDuke point out, Laguna Pueblo became “one of the ‘richer’ all-round native groups in the country by the early- to mid-1960s” after it shifted from a land-based economy (ranching and farming) to a wage-earner economy dominated by the mines.¹¹ However, benefits from the mines were only short term, and the long-term costs were high. After mining operations closed, the companies left “a gaping crater” and “piles of virulently radioactive slag”; unemployment returned to over 70 percent; and widespread radioactive contamination of the water supply made it difficult for the Laguna Pueblo people to return to a land-based economy.¹²

By using phrases such as “hole in the earth” and the death of “the last bony cattle,” Silko accurately depicts the environmental and socioeconomic consequences Laguna Pueblo faced. She repeatedly mentions “barbed-wire fences” when describing the transformation of Laguna land: in fact, she uses the phrase four times in the two paragraphs that describe the brief history of uranium mining on the Cebolleta land grant. Barbed-wire, of course, is a powerful metaphor for modern ideas of progress and civilization,

as well as twentieth-century barbarities. This image evokes the taming of the West, modern warfare, and detainment or segregation (as can be seen in the case of Japanese internment camps in the United States and Canada during World War II).¹³

In the context of nuclear history, barbed-wire fences suggest a more complicated reality: radioactive contamination that cannot be contained. While the fences reflect the separation of land from people (or more precisely the exploitation of indigenous land and people), they are officially put up to keep people away from the dangerous (and secret) mining operations. But, of course, the impact of the nuclear industry cannot be contained by the fences. In a memorable chapter of Terry Tempest Williams's *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (1991), entitled "The Clan of One-Breasted Women," Williams and nine other activists slip through the barbed-wire fence at the Nevada Test Site in an act of "civil disobedience" to protest bomb testing. While the barbed-wire fence symbolically marks the source of the calamities befalling her family and community living downwind from the Nevada Test Site, Williams transcends or erases boundaries that superficially contain the damage associated with the nuclear weapons industry.¹⁴

In a way that prefigures Williams's "trespass," Tayo crosses an emblematic barbed-wire fence when he enters an abandoned uranium mine.¹⁵ This act not only signifies a rejection of the contemporary idea of "progress," war, and segregation but also Tayo's entrance into the country marked by nuclear colonization. Tayo's grandmother, who witnessed a flash in the southeastern sky from the atom bomb detonated at White Sands on July 16, 1945, once asks Tayo, "Why did they make a thing like that?"¹⁶ Although Tayo could not answer his grandmother's question immediately, at the abandoned uranium mine, he comes to understand that the "flash" his grandmother witnessed was part of the larger pattern of destruction. Crawling through the barbed-wire fence, Tayo heads for the uranium mine shaft, and from there he looks toward the places where processed uranium ore ends up. Three hundred miles to the southeast is Trinity Site, where the first atom bomb was detonated. Deep in the Jemez Mountains are the top-secret laboratories, and only a hundred miles northeast is Los Alamos, where scientists gathered during the war to produce and develop the atom bomb.¹⁷ At the entrance to the mine shaft, Tayo experiences a revelation about the nuclear connections emanating from this place:

There was no end to it; it knew no boundaries; and he had arrived at the

point of convergence where the fate of all living things, and even the earth, had been laid. From the jungle of his dreaming he recognized why the Japanese voices had merged with Laguna voices, with Josiah's voice and Rocky's voice; the lines of cultures and worlds were drawn in flat dark lines on fine light sand, converging in the middle of witchery's final ceremonial sand painting. From that time on, human beings were one clan again, united by the fate the destroyers planned for all of them, for all living things; united by a circle of death that devoured people in cities twelve thousand miles away, victims who had never known these mesas, who had never seen the delicate colors of the rocks which boiled up their slaughter.¹⁸

Tayo realizes here that nuclear colonialism of the Southwest reflects the threat of destruction that the atom bomb poses to the world, and it explains why Tayo repeatedly identifies Japanese strangers with his family members from Laguna. When an American soldier kills a Japanese soldier in the Philippine jungle during the war, Tayo sees his uncle Josiah's face in the Japanese soldier's. Ironically, Josiah dies while Tayo is in the Pacific, leaving unrealized a project he had with Tayo to breed and raise Mexican cattle. After the war, at the train depot in Los Angeles, Tayo mistakes a Japanese boy for his cousin Rocky who died in the Philippine jungle. Tayo has blamed himself for his cousin's death.

On a superficial level, these instances reveal Tayo's "guilt" for leaving Laguna to join the army, but as Silko suggests in the above passage, they expose fundamental connections between Laguna and Japan: territories victimized by the production and use of nuclear weapons. Just as Tayo travels as a soldier from Laguna Pueblo to the Philippines, the nuclear landscape reaches from Laguna Pueblo to Japan in the form of atom bombs: the drastic changes the nuclear industry wrought on the American Southwest have impacted regions far removed, even across the Pacific Ocean.

Although Silko depicts transpacific nuclear connections specific to World War II, America's expansion into Asia during the Cold War is reflected in *Ceremony*. While the novel features what happens to Tayo after World War II, the scenes in the Philippine jungle evoke images of the Vietnam War. Notably, Tayo's grandmother's question—"Why did they make a thing like that?"—is answered only after Tayo returns to Laguna and finally recognizes the impact of uranium mining on Laguna Pueblo land. In other words, with her publication of *Ceremony* during the Cold War era, Silko revealed the contemporary state of nuclear colonialism and American expansionism that

had been kept secret under the name of “national security.” Tayo’s *descent* into the uranium mine then marks Silko’s *dissent* against American Cold War policy and its nature of concealment.

Terry Tempest Williams comes to a similar realization after being told by her father that a recurring dream she had about a “flash of light in the night in the desert” was not a dream but an actual bomb she witnessed while her family was driving home to Utah from Riverside, California, on September 7, 1957.¹⁹ Williams notes that although above-ground atomic tests in Nevada were “common . . . in the fifties,” the political climate in the United States did not allow residents to recognize the “deceit” they had been living under: “The Korean War was raging. McCarthyism was rampant. Ike was it, and the cold war was hot.”²⁰ In 1988, Williams breached the barbed-wire fence of the testing site to break the silence that endangered her family and community. Similarly, Tayo crosses barbed-wire fences in *Ceremony* to manifest Silko’s protest against Cold War ideology through which citizens’ lives are “protected” (read “threatened”) by permitting nuclear militarism and industrialism in the American Southwest and promoting American expansionism around the globe.

II. WITCHERY AND SUBVERSION OF THE COLONIAL NARRATIVE

In an earlier excerpt from *Ceremony*, referring to “witchery’s final ceremonial sand painting,” Silko emphasizes that radioactive contamination crosses boundaries of race and nationality, making human beings “one clan” that shares a common destiny of destruction: “From that time on, human beings were one clan again, united by the fate the destroyers planned for all of them.”²¹ Williams makes a similar claim when she enters the Nevada Test Site “on behalf of the Clan of One-Breasted Women.”²² While both writers use “clan” as a metaphor to evoke an image of a common familial unit, in *Ceremony*, “clan” is an indication of a larger pan-tribal narrative that could be used as a counterforce against the destroyers embodied by colonial forces and the threat of apocalyptic destruction in a nuclear age.

In addition to the clan, witchery has long been a part of southwestern tribal culture. While the idea of witchery existed among southwestern tribes for a long time, a profound connection between witchery and the colonial impact on tribal culture in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been recognized by several scholars. In *Keresan Texts* (1928), noted anthropologist Franz Boas introduced a traditional Pueblo oral story of “witches.”²³ Although it was told to him in 1919, it existed much earlier in

Pueblo regions, including the Acoma and Laguna Pueblos. Likewise, Shamoan Zamir (1993) points out that the practice and violence of witchcraft in the Southwest drastically increased when the Navajo people were confined to a reservation in the late nineteenth century. Later, when the Great Depression of the 1930s and early 1940s profoundly affected people's lives, witchery experienced another revival. As Zamir suggests, witchery was used among Navajo and Pueblo communities to deal with the pressures of colonialism, including the imposition of the national economy.²⁴

This explains why in *Ceremony* witchery is depicted as a signifier of both tribal narratives and contemporary colonial influences: as the novel progresses—as the witchery narrative advances—the impact of colonialism in the American Southwest is revealed. In “Healing via the Sunwise Cycle in Silko’s *Ceremony*,” Edith Swan quotes Silko’s own comments about witchery in the text: “In the novel, I’ve tried to go beyond any specific kind of Laguna witchery or Navaho witchery, and to begin to see witchery as a metaphor for the destroyers, or the counterforce, that force which counters vitality and birth. The counterforce is destruction and death.”²⁵ As Silko suggests here, the tribal narrative of witchery in *Ceremony* extends beyond the traditional definition of witchery. In fact, the destructive nature of the witchery narrative in *Ceremony* is often associated with the deadliest colonial force, in particular, the production and use of atomic weapons, created through an unnatural fragmentary technology—splitting the atom—a science defined by the discrete locations and activities that make up the Manhattan Project: from the first controlled nuclear reaction at the University of Chicago (on December 2, 1942) to the detonation of the first bomb at Trinity Site in Alamogordo, New Mexico (on July 16, 1945).²⁶

Images of “splitting” or “separation” permeate the Nuclear Age. At the onset of the era, the government and scientists chose the “remote barren west” for nuclear facilities and test sites, separating the area from the other parts of America, while the indigenous population and their land were rendered “others” for “national sacrifice.” Then, the military-industrial complex severed indigenous inhabitants from their land, disconnecting uranium ore from the earth and contaminating the area. In the course of an explosion, the atom was split to produce enormous energy. The actual production and employment of nuclear weapons during the Cold War echoes the motif of separation, fragmentation, and atomization.

Images of separation and fragmentation are also evident in Silko’s narrative. The violence and brutality Tayo sees in Emo, another World War II veteran, is deeply connected with these images: Emo’s penchant for “big

mortar shells that blew tanks and big trucks to pieces,” “jagged steel flakes that exploded from the grenades,” and teeth removed from “the corpse of a Japanese soldier” mirrors the tropes of “mutation” and “amputation” in the age of modern technology.²⁷ The pathology of modern warfare and violence, epitomized by Emo, aggravates Tayo’s psyche, scattering his self like “white smoke” and severing his connection to his community and the land.

Tayo’s physical and psychological separation from Laguna relates to the images of destruction and death depicted in the witchery narrative. In one of the poems inserted in Tayo’s story, witches gather to show off their charms and powers by displaying big cooking pots with “dead babies simmering in blood/circles of skull cut away all the brains sucked out,” while other witches open their skin bundles with “cinders from burned hogans where the dead lay” or “whorls of skin/cut from fingertips.”²⁸ Phrases such as “cut away,” “sucked out,” “cut from,” and “sliced from” reflect the fragmented modern world in which the strongest power is revealed as “separation” of “white skin people” from the land.

Silko consistently emphasizes colonialism’s detrimental impact—including that of modern warfare—on indigenous culture. Nevertheless, she attempts to subvert the colonial forces imposed on southwestern tribes by incorporating them into the witchery narrative. As discussed earlier, witchery has been shaped by colonial circumstances. Silko presents it as part of the diverse tribal narrative in *Ceremony*; witchery symbolizes not only the devastating colonial forces but also the survival of native culture in hybrid forms. It represents, in other words, part of the vitality and continual evolution of tribal narratives. In an important passage from the novel, a medicine man, Betonie, explains to Tayo how witchcraft tricks Navajo and Pueblo people into ascribing destruction to white people. Betonie tells Tayo that white people and European culture are part of the tribal narrative, not things outside the Pueblo imagination:

“This is the trickery of the witchcraft,” he said. “They want us to believe all evil resides with white people. Then we will look no further to see what is really happening. They want us to separate ourselves from white people, to be ignorant and helpless as we watch our own destruction. But white people are only tools that the witchery manipulates; and I tell you, we can deal with white people, with their machines and their beliefs. We can because we invented white people; it was Indian witchery that made white people in the first place.”²⁹

By subsuming “white people” and “their machines and their beliefs” into the tribal narrative of witchery, Betonie teaches Tayo that evil resides not outside but within the communal imagination. In this way, Tayo is able to deal with the seemingly inconceivable idea of destruction embodied in the atrocity of contemporary warfare.

Betonie’s idea that evil resides within the communal imagination reflects one of the characteristics of Laguna narrative. In *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*, Silko refers to the connection between the uranium mines and Laguna oral narratives:

The Laguna people have not witnessed changes to the land without strong reactions. Descriptions of the landscape before the mine are as vivid as any description of the present-day destruction by the open-pit mining. By its very ugliness and by the violence it does to the land, the Jackpile Mine insures that, from now on, it, too, will be included in the vast body of narratives that makes up the history of the Laguna people and the Pueblo landscape. And the description of what that landscape looked like before the uranium mining began will always carry considerable impact.³⁰

Here the impact of uranium mining on Laguna territory is undeniable, but Silko does not submit to a totally apocalyptic interpretation of the transformed landscape. Instead, she attempts to incorporate the pattern of human pathologies, including colonization and nuclear threats, into a pattern of the larger Laguna narrative that is deeply connected with the tribal landscape. “Storytelling,” Silko writes, “had the effect of placing an incident in the wider context of Pueblo history so that individual loss or failure was less personalized and became part of the village’s eternal narratives about loss and failure, narratives that identify the village and that tell the people who they are.”³¹ Silko suggests here that, by contextualizing a landscape altered by uranium mines *through* Laguna Pueblo oral narrative, its impact will be less tragic, making the existence of the uranium mines only a part—though a significant part—of Pueblo culture and history.

In *Ceremony*, as a rhetorical tactic of subversion, Silko uses the structure of the Laguna narrative to absorb linear, apocalyptic thinking into a wider, circular understanding. This enables Tayo or the local community to reinterpret the imposition of destructive nuclear colonization on their own terms. Storytelling, in this way, becomes an empowering device that supports the voices of survivors in a nuclear age.

III. STERLING'S DESCENT INTO THE MINESHAFT

More than ten years after her first novel, Silko returned to the nuclearized Southwest in her second novel, *Almanac of the Dead*. Like Tayo who reaches a site disfigured by the nuclear mining industry after passing through a barbed-wire fence, Sterling, at the end of Silko's second novel, crawls through a barbed-wire fence and reaches an abandoned uranium mine:

Sterling made his way up a sandy hill and then slid down the crumbling clay bank of a small arroyo. He tore a cuff on his pants crawling through the barbed-wire fence that marked the mine boundaries. Ahead all he could see were mounds of tailings thirty feet high, uranium waste blowing in the breeze, carried by the rain to springs and rivers. Here was the new work of the Destroyers; here was destruction and poison. Here was where life ended. What had been so remarkable about the return of the giant snake had been how close the giant snake was to the mountains of tailings.³²

Sterling's recognition of the Destroyers parallels Tayo's understanding of witchery. While in *Ceremony* the destroyers' (or witchery's) doings are represented by the violence of contemporary warfare and the ongoing effects of nuclear colonization, in *Almanac of the Dead*, the new work of the Destroyers (or sorcerers, called Gunadeeyahs) is understood as the evil after-effects of modernization and the ambiguous future prefigured by a giant stone snake figure appearing near the uranium waste piles. Symbolized by tearing the cuff on his pants, Sterling's descent into the mine is more challenging and less heroic than Tayo's. The fact that he had not paid much attention to the old people's stories prevents him from connecting everything clearly at first. But gradually Sterling starts to remember: the old people's protest against opening the mine, the first atomic explosion at Trinity Site, the Japanese incinerated by the bombs, and "how fierce the Mexican tribes were—how quickly and casually they had killed."³³ Sterling remembers, "Tucson was Mexico."³⁴

Evoking Tayo's revelation at the end of *Ceremony*, in *Almanac of the Dead* Silko depicts the devastating effects the nuclear industry wrought upon the Laguna community during the Cold War. When the United States required uranium for new weapons in 1949, tribal elders were deeply concerned and strongly opposed mining: "The old-timers had been dead set

against ripping open Mother Earth so near to the holy place of the emergence.”³⁵ However, the US government overruled the opposition, and the tribal council had to go along with the decision. After all, the mines offered jobs to the local people, including World War II veterans who came back looking for work, and there were not many other opportunities on the reservation. While uranium mines profited multinational corporations and the American government, Laguna Pueblo “became the first of the Pueblos to realize wealth from something terrible done to the earth.”³⁶

As Silko describes, the objections of the “old-timers” were not unfounded. When the mines were closed, the corporations left without restoring the land. The short-term profits the mining industry passed on to a few members of the community led to long-term environmental, socioeconomic, and cultural destruction shared by the entire community.³⁷ Sterling, in a way, epitomizes the tribe’s complicity. In the novel, a stone snake figure had been discovered near the uranium mine after the mine opened near Paguate village at the onset of the Cold War era. When a film crew visits Laguna Pueblo, Sterling is appointed Laguna’s film commissioner “to keep the Hollywood people under control.”³⁸ Because Sterling cannot keep Hollywood crew members away from the sacred great stone snake, he is ousted from Laguna Pueblo. Although Sterling avoids implicating himself in the controversy over the mine, he cannot escape blame for failing to protect the stone snake from the Hollywood film crew. Sterling insists that “nothing had actually been stolen or removed,” but the tribal council sees it differently and blames Sterling for betraying their trust.³⁹ Sterling’s unintentional collusion with the Hollywood crew members reflects the complicity of the Laguna people who could not protect Laguna from mining operations. While Silko recognizes the complicity of tribal residents, she puts more blame on the capitalistic nuclear industry and the government agencies for their myopic and deceptive practices that had such a devastating impact on the impoverished reservation.

While Tayo witnesses the modern pathology in the Pacific, it is in Tucson, where drug abuse, illegal organ selling, child pornography, rape, and murder take place, that Sterling witnesses the destructive and violent forces of contemporary America. After his return from Tucson, Sterling heads for the uranium mine where the giant stone snake sits. Although he regrets that he did not listen more carefully to what Aunt Marie and the old people used to say about “a connection the giant snake had with Mexico,” he eventually comes to recognize that the violence in Tucson is the continuation of violence initiated by the sorcerers (Gunadeeyahs) or Destroyers hundreds

of years before Europeans arrived in Mexico.⁴⁰ Just as Tayo realizes that the contemporary colonial forces are part of the witchery narrative, Sterling comes to comprehend that the violence in Tucson is linked to the violence created by the sorcerers, embodied by such historical figures as Cortés and Montezuma, who “robbed graves for human flesh and bones to make their fatal ‘powers.’”⁴¹ Nevertheless, Silko views the uranium mines, which “devoured entire mesas,” as the embodiment of the most powerful work of sorcerers.⁴²

IV. THE GIANT STONE SNAKE AND INTERNATIONAL ALLIANCES

Just as the witchery narrative transcends continents in *Ceremony*, the stone snake in *Almanac of the Dead* goes beyond the regional; it crosses geographical, temporal, and cultural boundaries. The stone snake Silko describes in the novel is based on an actual biomorphic configuration discovered in spring 1980 near the base of piled uranium tailings. Silko explains in *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit* how the Laguna residents refused to restrict the interpretation of the stone snake’s meaning: “There had been attempts to confine the meaning of the snake to an official story suitable for general consumption. But the Laguna Pueblos go on producing their own rich and continuously developing body of oral and occasionally written stories that reject any decisive conclusion in favor of ever-increasing possibilities.”⁴³ In other words, the stone snake lends micro- and macrovisions or, in Silko’s words, “multiple meanings,” to her narrative.⁴⁴ *Almanac of the Dead* encourages similar possibilities of interpretation. While introducing different interpretations of the snake (for example, some argued that the snake carried a message that the people who made the mine had won), Silko uses this divine snake spirit as a means to connect Native America to other indigenous populations around the globe:

In the Americas and in Africa, the people loved and worshiped the gentle giant Damballah, or Quetzalcoatl, or Ma ah shra true ee, Divine Snake of the Beautiful Lake. Maybe the Old Testament Garden of Eden story is the first strike by northern tribes against the religion of the Africans to the south and their worship of the great snake, Damballah. Those who loathe snakes have been brainwashed by the Old Testament. Even ordinary snakes are spirit messengers to the spirit beings and Mother Earth.⁴⁵

In the Judeo-Christian context, snakes have often been associated with “evil” just as the nuns at the mission school “terrified the children with the story of the snake in the Garden of Eden to end devotion to Quetzalcoatl.”⁴⁶ Silko, however, deconstructs this association by viewing the snake in the context of indigenous cultures and precolonial histories of the Americas and Africa. In Laguna, giant snakes, “Ma ah shra true ee,” have been revered as sacred messengers; Quetzalcoatl is one of the most important gods in Mexico; in Africa and Caribbean voodoo culture, Damballah is a primordial deity who created all life. In a way, Silko’s stone snake is a pan-tribal and cross-cultural symbol reinforcing powerful indigenous belief systems against colonial forces.

In terms of nuclear colonialism, the American Southwest and colonial Africa have more in common than it appears. As J. D. L. Moore notes in *South Africa and Nuclear Proliferation*, during the 1940s, most of the uranium procured from Canada and the Belgian Congo (and later from South Africa, Australia, and Portugal) went to the United States.⁴⁷ In fact, colonial Africa was America’s first supplier of uranium. Makoto Oda further points out that the ore making the first atom bombs possible in 1945 was purchased from a Belgian mining company and extracted from a mine in the Belgian Congo; about 1,250 tons of uranium ore were shipped to New York at the beginning of World War II and later purchased by the US government.⁴⁸ The production of the atom bombs depended on the exploitation of African land and labor, just as it depended on the exploitation of Native America.

Silko does not explicitly connect Africa with nuclear colonization, yet her dissent from the apocalyptic view of colonial influence on indigenous people around the globe should not be overlooked. For example, in *Almanac of the Dead*, at the International Holistic Healer’s Convention, Barefoot Hopi, a revolutionary hero, recognizes the colonial connections between people of Africa and the tribal people of the Americas and asserts that black Africans and other “foreign allies” will help Native America rise up; he claims that indigenous forces in the Americas will follow in the footsteps of South Africa, whose lands had been returned to Ogoun or Damballah with the sacrifice of both white and black people of Africa.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, Clinton, another participant at the convention, focuses on the deprived history of black Indians, the descendants of American Indians and escaped African slaves, in America. Clinton believes that the spirits of African ancestors live on in America. The spirits accompanied the slaves who had been taken away from their homeland: “Millions of black Indians were scattered throughout the Americas. Africans in the Americas had always been ‘home’

because ‘home’ is where the ancestor spirits are. From the gentle giants, Damballah and Quetzalcoatl, to the Maize mother, and the Twin Brothers and Old Woman Spider, Africa and the Americas had been possessed.”⁵⁰ Through these characters, Silko suggests that, like the tribal people of South Africa who fought against colonial forces, Native Americans will rise up again to regain their land, but this time with aid and support from various people of color, cultures, and nationalities.

In *Almanac of the Dead*, the cross-cultural and pan-tribal coalitions that consist of indigenous Americans, black Africans, African Americans, Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and black Indians are presented as counterforces against capitalism, colonialism, and political borders. As many critics point out, such pan-tribal and cross-cultural coalitions could be a salvation for Native America. Joni Adamson, for example, looks for “a model for community activism” in such coalitions, insisting that finding a “common ground” with people from different groups, backgrounds, and professions is a key for community activism.⁵¹ Channette Romero goes further and points out that *Almanac of the Dead* presents a model of “tribal internationalists” that “overcome[s] the limitations of the American Indian Movement.”⁵² Although the consequences of colonialism are overwhelming, Silko combats the ever-evolving destructive power of European hegemony with indigenous power that crosses cultural, racial, and national boundaries.

V. STERLING’S EPIPHANY

Silko’s rhetorical subversiveness is best explained by Craig S. Womack in *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*. Womack contrasts the work of Silko’s imagination to the idea of entropy invoked by Thomas Pynchon in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Womack believes “Silko’s metaphor is not entropy but a redistribution of energy” in which the “European order dies off because of its moral and spiritual bankruptcy and capitalism’s inability to sustain itself.”⁵³ Although its fall seems apocalyptic, Womack suggests, it is not “the end of the world”: “As things European fall back to earth, indigenous consciousness takes over. Ancestor spirits spiral and swirl around the world’s indigenous populations, urging them to rise up, and the continent begins a return to more communal ways of being.”⁵⁴ Womack argues here that viewing the novel as “apocalyptic” reveals the novel’s themes only partially because the circular motion of energy, based on the larger ecological system and indigenous consciousness, is at the center of Silko’s work. This is represented by what Old Yoeme tells Lecha in *Almanac*

of the Dead:

The energy or “electricity” of a being’s spirit was not extinguished by death; it was set free from the flesh. Dust to dust or as a meal for pack rats, the energy of the spirit was never lost. Out of the dust grew the plants; the plants were consumed and became muscle and bone; and all the time, the energy had only been changing form, nothing had been lost or destroyed.⁵⁵

Old Yoeme believes that the energy of spirit would go on while changing its form as represented in the native almanac, native prophecies, and pan-tribal mobilization. Sterling’s epiphany at the end of the novel reinforces this belief as well.

Sterling’s revelation seems pessimistic at first because he realizes that his life, too, is on the verge of destruction: ironically, however, what Sterling had thought was vanishing—old people’s stories and their beliefs—is returning as the indigenous prophecies foretold. Considering the resurgence of pan-tribal power, tragedy resides only in those who do not believe in the circular motion of native history. Sterling recovers from this tragic thinking and ultimately arrives at a dramatic conclusion:

Sterling sat for a long time near the stone snake. The breeze off the junipers cooled his face and neck. He closed his eyes. The snake didn’t care if people were believers or not; the work of the spirits and prophecies went on regardless. Spirit beings might appear anywhere, even near open-pit mines. The snake didn’t care about the uranium tailings; humans had desecrated only themselves with the mine, not the earth. Burned and radioactive, with all humans’ death, the earth would still be sacred. Man was too insignificant to desecrate her.⁵⁶

Here, by equalizing all places (“spirit beings might appear anywhere”), including the mine and test sites, Sterling appreciates the Pueblo repudiation of hierarchies: “No thing or location on the earth is of greater or lesser value than another.”⁵⁷ Through such understanding, Sterling starts to see beyond the linear and apocalyptic vision of colonial forces.

Silko is not indifferent to the destructive forces of colonialism in *Almanac of the Dead*. She opposes those forces by emphasizing the belief that indigenous spirits and land have the power to transform the apocalyptic imagination. In the above passage, the parallel between “the work of the

spirits and prophecies” and the sacred earth is informative. Silko repeatedly reminds readers that, with or without violence, a global indigenous movement is happening and will continue: just as humans cannot control planetary dynamics, nobody has the power to halt the indigenous movement that has already begun. It might not climax within a few years, but it *will* materialize, just as natural forces such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and droughts occur despite humans’ will.

CONCLUSION

During the Cold War period, when other literary works portrayed nuclear fear, nuclear anxiety, and nuclear apocalypse, Silko challenged colonial nuclear discourse in the American Southwest. In *Ceremony*, Tayo’s descent into a uranium mine reveals the pattern of transpacific destructive forces at the hands of nuclear industrialism and militarism. Detrimental influences of contemporary colonial forces are evident in this novel, but Silko attempts to subvert them by incorporating them into a pan-tribal witchery narrative, in effect redefining the colonial narrative as just one part of the Laguna tribal narrative. In *Almanac of the Dead* Silko features the darker side of modern life. Although she reflects a more apocalyptic tone shaped by the legacy of the Cold War in her second novel, she continues to contest the destructive power of colonial hegemony, promoting instead a transnational indigenous movement.

In his well-known article “No Apocalypse, Not Now (full speed ahead, seven missiles, seven missives)” (1984) Jacques Derrida wrote, “Literature has always belonged to the nuclear epoch.”⁵⁸ Following Derrida’s nuclear criticism, which draws attention to the role of literature in the Nuclear Age, a more recent 2008 study by Daniel Cordle demonstrates how nuclear technology pervades our daily lives, particularly “mainstream” literature, and argues that since the Cold War is defined by “suspense” (“anticipation of disaster rather than disaster itself”), Silko’s *Ceremony*, too, is “caught in a moment of cultural suspense.”⁵⁹ Cordle’s statement is correct in that Silko’s work strongly reflects the ubiquity of the Cold War, especially its apocalyptic tone and nuclear anxiety and its influence on the American imagination. However, Silko’s attempt to overcome such powerful rhetoric, despite the odds against it, should not be dismissed. Silko’s fiction suggests that she may see things a little differently from Derrida. In Silko’s novels and in the Laguna worldview she depicts, the Nuclear Age belongs to stories, rather than the other way around. Through story, Silko challenges

popular representations of nuclearism during the Cold War and offers alternatives to the hegemonic system supporting nuclear colonization.

NOTES

This article is the result of research supported by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research (Kakenhi) number 25770111.

¹ Valerie L. Kuletz, *The Tainted Desert: Environmental and Social Ruin in the American West* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 6. Kuletz defines nuclear colonialism as follows: “My use of the term ‘nuclear colonialism’ attempts to situate the emergent nuclear landscape in the arid regions of the American Southwest within a larger history of US internal colonialism, that is, within the expropriation of native lands and the displacement of North America’s indigenous population by their European conquerors” (6).

² *Ibid.*, 20.

³ US Department of Energy Nevada Operations Office, “United States Nuclear Test: July 1945 through September 1992,” December 2000, accessed December 9, 2013, http://www.nv.doe.gov/library/publications/historical/DOENV_209_REV15.pdf.

⁴ On August 13, 2013, the US Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia ruled that the Obama administration’s intention to close the proposed waste site contradicts a federal law. “Obama Administration Violating Law On Nuclear Waste Dump Decision Delay: Appeals Court,” *Huffington Post*, August 13, 2013, accessed September 5, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/13/obama-nuclear-waste-dump_n_3749254.html.

⁵ Kuletz, *Tainted Desert*, 12. On the studies of nuclearism and its impact on Native America, see Donald A. Grinde and Bruce E. Johansen, *Ecocide of Native America: Environmental Destruction on Indian Lands and Peoples* (Santa Fe: Clear Light, 1995), chaps. 5 and 8; Ward Churchill and Winona LaDuke, “Native North America: The Political Economy of Radioactive Colonialism,” in *The State of Native America: Genocide, Colonization, and Resistance*, ed. M. Annette Jaimes (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 241–66; Noriko Ishiyama, *Hokubei senjuu minzoku to kaku haikibutu: Kankyō seigi wo meguru tousō* [Native Americans and nuclear waste: Disputes over environmental justice] (Tokyo: Akashi Shoten, 2004); Jun Kamata, *Henkyō no teikō: Kaku haikibutu to amerika senjuumin no shakai undō* [Resistance at the margin: Radioactive waste and American Indian social movement] (Tokyo: Ochanomizu shōbō, 2006).

⁶ Kuletz, *Tainted Desert*, 13. About the strategic construction of the myth of the American West as “the barren land,” see also Ishiyama, “Nebada jikkenjō to yakka

maunten: Kaku no kuukan kouchiku to jinshu shugi” [Nevada Test Site and Yucca Mountain: The construction of nuclear space and racism], *American Review* 42 (2008): 57–76.

⁷ For more detail on Simon J. Ortiz’s *Fight Back* and its nuclear connection, see Kyoko Matsunaga, “Resisting and Surviving Apocalypse: Simon J. Ortiz’s (Post) Colonial Nuclear Narrative,” *Southwestern American Literature* 33, no. 1 (Fall 2008): 15–27.

⁸ Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 243.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 244.

¹⁰ The information about the history of the Laguna Pueblo uranium mining comes from the following sources: Kuletz, *Tainted Desert*, 24; Churchill and LaDuke, “Political Economy of Radioactive Colonialism,” 256–61; Philip Sittnick, “Uranium Mining and Its Impact on Laguna Pueblo: A Study Guide for an Interdisciplinary Unit,” July 1998, accessed September 5, 2013, www.miningwatch.ca/updir/umine.pdf, 13–18.

¹¹ Churchill and LaDuke, “Political Economy of Radioactive Colonialism,” 259.

¹² *Ibid.*; Sittnick, “Uranium Mining,” 17–18.

¹³ Paul Fussell describes barbed wire as a powerful symbol of war and its ironic evolution from elatively benign use in agricultural and pastoral landscapes to deadly use around the trenches during the World War I. Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 42, 96.

¹⁴ Terry Tempest Williams, *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 288.

¹⁵ Of course, the irony here is that the nuclear presence “trespassed” on land that had belonged to indigenous people.

¹⁶ Silko, *Ceremony*, 245.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 246.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Williams, *Refuge*, 282–83.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 283–84.

²¹ Silko, *Ceremony*, 246.

²² Williams, *Refuge*, 290.

²³ Franz Boas, *Keresan Texts*, vol. 8, part 1 (New York: American Ethnological Society, 1928), 56–76.

²⁴ Shamoan Zamir, “Literature in a National Sacrifice Area: Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*,” in *New Voices in Native American Literary Criticism*, ed. Arnold Krupat (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 401–02.

²⁵ Edith Swan, “Healing via the Sunwise Cycle in Silko’s *Ceremony*,” *American Indian Quarterly*, no. 12 (1988): 314.

²⁶ Thus far, many scholars have recognized the connection between the atom bomb

and the witchery narrative in *Ceremony*. For example, Lawrence Buell suggests that since the manifestations of the “destroyers” are European conquest and technological transformation, witchery exists in the production and detonation of the atom bombs; Robert Nelson emphasizes the renovated ceremony in which the spirit of the destroyers is invested in the atom bomb; Shamoan Zamir notes the embodiment of cultural transformation and innovation of Native Americans in the face of Western colonization, represented by a “capitalist political economy since the forties in the shape of uranium mining, atomic power development, and an atomic-weapons testing program of grotesque proportions.” Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), 287; Zamir, “Literature in a National Sacrifice Area,” 398; Nelson, *Place and Vision*, 148–49.

²⁷ Ibid., 60–62.

²⁸ Silko, *Ceremony*, 134.

²⁹ Ibid., 132

³⁰ Silko, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 44.

³¹ Ibid., 91.

³² Silko, *Almanac of the Dead* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 760–61.

³³ Ibid., 759.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 34.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ About the socioeconomic and cultural effects of the mine on the Laguna people and the reclamation of the mine, see Sittnick, “Uranium Mining,” 17–20.

³⁸ Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, 35.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 759.

⁴¹ Ibid., 760.

⁴² Ibid., 759.

⁴³ Ibid., 132–33.

⁴⁴ Silko, *Yellow Woman*, 133.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 147.

⁴⁶ Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, 519.

⁴⁷ D. L. Moore, *South Africa and Nuclear Proliferation: South Africa's Nuclear Capabilities and Intentions in the Context of International Non-Proliferation Policies* (London: Macmillan, 1987), 12.

⁴⁸ Makoto Oda, Afterword in *Hiroshima* (1984 repr., Tokyo: Kodansha, 1997), 420.

⁴⁹ Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, 731–32.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 742.

⁵¹ Joni Adamson, *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism: The Middle Place* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001), 17–76.

⁵² Channette Romero, “Envisioning a ‘Network of Tribal Coalitions’: Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead*,” *American Indian Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (2002): 623.

⁵³ Craig S. Womack, *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 253.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, 719.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 762.

⁵⁷ Silko, *Yellow Woman*, 133.

⁵⁸ Jacques Derrida, “No Apocalypse, Not Now (full speed ahead, seven missiles, seven missives),” *Diacritics* 14, no. 2 (Summer 1984): 27.

⁵⁹ Daniel Cordle, *States of Suspense: The Nuclear Age, Postmodernism and United States Fiction and Prose*. (New York: Manchester University Press, 2008), 2, 120.

