

Peripheral Worldscapes in Circulation: Towards a Productive Understanding of Untranslatability

Doro Wiese

In this chapter, I want to firstly shift understandings of untranslatability so that it can include narrative forms and tropes, and secondly discuss the novels *Ceremony* and *Almanac of the Dead* by the American Indian author Leslie Marmon Silko, of Laguna Pueblo and German origin, as case studies. I place myself squarely within seminal debates currently in progress in several academic fields: first, the discussion on so-called world literature as a distinct theoretical and practical approach within Comparative Literature; second, the question of untranslatability that has emerged from the “world literature” debate; and third, the issue of indigenous sovereignty and cultural autonomy that is central to American Indian Studies. When framed in terms of the discussion on world literature, untranslatability is a term that indicates a philosophy of language and culture. David Damrosch postulates that literary works are subject to transformations when circulating in other cultures, enabled by, for instance, translations; Emily Apter and Barbara Cassin remind us that processes of cultural transfer entail incommensurabilities, untranslatabilities and mis- or non-translation. Taking these positions one step further, I posit that untranslatability can also be established through narrative forms and tropes in works by authors like Silko, and that this untranslatability is discernable to Euro-Western readers, who then are able to come into contact with the fraying of meaning that, according to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, is experienced when one is translating.

Through a close reading that focuses on the formation of secrecy and the destruction of character in Silko’s works, I will show that her textual strategies allow for a multi-cultural semiotics in which the untranslatable and the translatable meet. The proposed notion of untranslatability disturbs the dichotomy between center and periphery, a dichotomy that fundamentally relies on the discursive nexus between Western hegemonic power and the centrality of its knowledge production. Understanding how indigenous notions are or are not “translatable” is essential to our understandings of globalization processes and indigenous cultural autonomy, and can shift global power relations. Silko’s novels are traversing the global and, as such, claim an undeniable presence

within what is considered the center and the periphery, while also shifting their boundaries and relations.

Shifting Understandings of Untranslatability

According to the authors, editors and translators of the *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, untranslatability is a concept that indicates the fragility inherent in sense making. Sense making is a never completed process inevitably threatened by unintelligibility and failure, especially when we work across languages and cultures. Yet, as I want to argue, when reading fiction, readers need to understand much more than the meaning of words and concepts. As I have contended elsewhere, readers need to make sense of “the use of vocabulary, syntax, semantics, characters, narration, and plot – the whole configuration of the fictional text’s chronotopical world” (Wiese 6). Sense making can fail on any of these levels, and therefore a fictional configuration can, similarly to words and concepts, evoke a confrontation with untranslatables. According to translation theorist Lawrence Venuti (1995; 1998; 2000), this confrontation with untranslatables is desirable if we want to overcome an ethnocentric violence foundational for many translations that circulate on the global literary market. According to Venuti, translations are nowadays evaluated highly if they give readers the illusion of reading an original rather than a translated work. If translators want to become successful, they need to succumb to a common practice that aims to create a translation’s immediate intelligibility and accessibility. According to Venuti, this economy of violence – which is partial to the hegemonic values of the target culture – can be interrupted by a translation practice that asserts the cultural difference of the original work (1995). For Venuti, a good translation reminds readers of the heterogeneity of discourses and reveals the translation to be a translation (1998: 11). This ethics of translation is also highlighted by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in “The Politics of Translation.” She stresses that translations facilitate “the experience of contained alterity in an unknown language spoken in a different cultural milieu” if the translator allows a text’s logic and rhetoric to diverge (179). Untranslatability can thereby be understood, as I want to show, as a marker of cultural difference.

Building upon this discussion, I argue that Silko withholds or distorts crucial information in her texts and establishes layers of meaning only those familiar with indigenous belief systems and narrative traditions such as, for instance, oral storytelling can detect. The text thereby gives rise to different reader-responses. Narratively established untranslatability can therefore be defined as being recognizable and discernable. By this I mean that Western,

non-indigenous readers, including myself, can be confronted with notions that are untranslatable and impinge on their Western ways of knowing and being. Readers that are, however, familiar with the indigenous world-views established in Silko's work might be able to fill in the gaps established in her work. I will show that it is possible to register and discern what kind of narrative strategies give rise to this differentiated form of (un-)translatability.

My suggestion to extend the notion of untranslatability to include narrative forms and tropes gives even greater weight to the intervention that this concept is meant to make. According to Emily Apter, world literature as a field of study needs to be highly aware of how it contributes to the marketing of differences. In many of Apter's texts, including her most recent monograph *Against World Literature*, she admonishes scholars, editors and readers for "zoom[ing] over the speed bumps of untranslatability to cover ground" (3). Untranslatability is a means to disturb processes of appropriation within the field of world literature, and such disturbance is, according to Apter, brought about because any meaning is language-specific and cannot be separated from its original context. Untranslatables – words and concepts that often remain untranslated in other languages – are for Apter just an extreme case that makes the general condition of sense making visible. Any translation is an approximation, and any idea of easy access to linguistic, philosophical or literary knowledge is an illusion that bypasses the unsolvable problem of language specificity.

Apter's understanding of untranslatability contributes to a lively debate in the discipline of Comparative Literature on power relations within its field. Many comparatists that study world literature are aware of the problems that come along with such an all-encompassing term. To study world literature seems to indicate a comprehensive approach that includes literature from all over the world, regardless of its place and time, its genre or its linguistic belonging. Such an approach conceals the Eurocentric history of the discipline of Comparative Literature, which is mirrored in the conceptualization of the field of world literature as well. For example, the first anthologies of world literature that appeared after World War II were based on Judeo-Christian and European literary texts, reflecting the prevalently European origin of comparatist scholars at that time, a geopolitical situatedness that changed when Comparative Literature became predominantly taught in the USA (see D'haen; Damrosch; Kadir).

By now, the influence of multiculturalism and postcolonialism has shifted this Western-centered approach of text selections in anthologies of world literature considerably. Nevertheless, Erich Auerbach's bleak outlook on the possible development of the study of world literature still haunts the field. In his famous essay "Philology and Weltliteratur," he apprehends homogenization as

a possible danger for the notion of world literature, a vision in which globalization leads to “a single literary culture, only a few literary languages and perhaps even a single literary language” (129). If scholars who work in the field of world literature want to avoid this homogenization, they need to pay attention to untranslatability precisely because this concept brings inappropriable cultural differences to the fore.

In accordance with Auerbach's understandings of the dangers of homogenization through globalization, I want to posit that it is not merely the untranslatability of words and concepts that readers, editors and scholars need to pay attention to. To avoid homogenization of the literary field, it is equally important to take account of narrative forms and tropes that do not accord with the Western literary tradition and thereby add to the multiplicity of literature and the literary. Narrative forms and tropes can show as much as words and concepts the specificity of cultural difference. Thus, an extended notion of untranslatability that includes them adds another dimension to the project that the editors of the *Dictionary of Untranslatables* have in mind when they state that they intend to outline a “political theory of community,” one that goes beyond “the limits of discrete national languages and traditions” and makes place for a view that languages can neither be owned nor claimed (xv). This “political theory of community” is guided by the idea that untranslatables point towards uncontainable differences, differences that we as readers, listeners, and speakers are made aware of in and through languages. Untranslatables point towards the possibility of being together in a world beyond the nation-state as subjects marked by unerasable, uncontainable, uncontrollable, irreducible difference.

My understanding of narrative forms in which untranslatables can be perceivably distinct, while their untranslatability poses riddles to readers unacquainted with their specificity, aims to extend this democratic project. Silko's works are excellent examples of this democratic aim, since her establishment and inclusion of untranslatable notions brings the unique achievements of American Indians to the fore without betraying the need to keep indigenous knowledge “untranslatable” to a mainstream Western audience in order to avoid those exoticizing appropriations that Anishinaabe writer and scholar Gerard Vizenor has called “portraits of dominance” (1998: 152). Instead of supporting a view of American Indians as being relegated of the past, Silko makes readers aware of the undeniable presence of untranslatable, hence unappropriable, indigenous narrative traditions that are part of the US American literary canon. I will look in particular at two novels by Silko, *Ceremony* (1977) and *Almanac of the Dead* (1991), to show how her use of oral traditions of storytelling clashes with Western reading habits. The untranslatability resulting from this confronts Western audiences with worldscapes in dissonance with

their own linguistic and conceptual frames of knowing and being. At the same time, it can be central to the production of indigenous histories, creating an essential space for the expression of alternative worldscapes that cannot be seen to belong exclusively to the periphery since they circulate within a hegemonic culture, too.

The Multi-Cultural Semiotics of Silko's *Ceremony*

Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* is doubtlessly one of the key texts of American literature. In 1996, an informal survey at the meeting of the Modern Language Association concluded that the novel is among the four most important American publications (see Roemer 9). As Kenneth M. Roemer explains in "Silko's Arroyos as Mainstream," there are a number of factors that made the novel accessible to a broader public. The Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Movement brought social injustices to the fore, with repercussions in academic fields like Literary Studies. For instance, in the 1970s, the formation of canons was increasingly criticized, and scholars began looking outside the box for emerging new talents on the literary market. *Ceremony* was praised in high circulation newspapers and journals like the *Library Journal*, *The Choice*, *Newsweek* and the *New York Times Book Review* (see Roemer 16–17). The novel successfully combines hegemonic narrative genres like the Euro-American *Bildungsroman* with traditional Laguna Pueblo and Navajo myths, stories and heroic figures, so that Western readers have a grasp on the narrative genre, while possibly being attracted to its being "different enough" from their normal frame of reference (Roemer 13). With its story of a traumatized World War II veteran returning home to his reservation, *Ceremony* furthermore connects well to the issue of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that emerged in the wake of the Vietnam War. Of the soldiers who came home, 15.2% suffered from the psychological damage of warfare, and members of minorities suffered in considerably higher numbers, possibly because old and new racisms were a further burden when reintegrating into society. Since the effects of racism constitute another topic that *Ceremony* explores, the novel can be seen to participate in the analysis of societal issues contemporary to its publication in 1977.

Specific to *Ceremony* is, however, the unique exploration of indigenous myths, stories and heroic figures in combination with narrative patterns of Western provenance like those of the *Bildungsroman*. I would like to discuss here specifically the charge that Paula Gunn Allen has brought forward against Silko's appropriation of traditional stories of Laguna Pueblo heritage. Allen finds *Ceremony* particularly troublesome to teach, because, according to

Laguna Pueblo tradition, some of the knowledge depicted in the story should not be told to outsiders. In the classroom, she has therefore chosen to focus on its narrative techniques, foregoing an approach encouraging an attitude she has encountered in many of her students, who are

voraciously interested in the exotic aspects of Indian ways – they usually mean by that traditional spiritual practices, understandings and beliefs ... At every least opportunity, they vigorously wrest the discussion from theme, symbol, structure and plot to questions of “medicine,” sacred language, rituals, and spiritual customs.

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Allen fears that outsiders to Navajo and Laguna Pueblo traditions might objectify, explain, detail and analyze their practices and beliefs “as though they were simply curios, artifacts, fetishes ... objects of interest and patronization” instead of powerful ways of conceiving the world (383). When discussing Allen’s charge against Silko, David L. Moore, in “Rough Knowledge and Radical Understanding: Sacred Silence in American Indian Literatures,” argues that their understandings of story-telling diverge from each other: while Allen brings the issues of cultural privacy and property to the fore, Silko highlights the context of storytelling, specifically when she discusses her mythopoetics. Because the context is always changing, the content and use of traditional stories and knowledges is for Silko constantly changing, too.

As someone who is not familiar with Laguna Pueblo customs and myths, it is impossible for me to assess either Allen’s charge or Silko’s affirmation of change: I lack the appropriate knowledge and do not want to be disrespectful to important interventions made by writers who simply know better than me. In the current context, when discussing the value of untranslatability, I see, however, a chance to bridge their positions. Allen, from my point of view, is in particular wary about the exoticizing and intrusive questions that non-Laguna Pueblo readers might have, which Silko’s disclosure of some elements that pertain to traditional Laguna Pueblo myths could give rise to. Yet a close reading of *Ceremony* shows that Silko only exposes certain elements, while being careful not to disclose others. To give an example: *Ceremony* tells the story of the mixed-blood Pueblo Tayo, who returns, after the end of World War II, to the reservation in which he grew up. He suffers from a mysterious illness that leads to constant vomiting, constant unresolved grieving and the constant return of traumatic war images. Therefore, his family decides to send for a traditional medicine man. The encounter between Tayo and Old Ku’oosh contains three important elements. Firstly, Old Ku’oosh speaks in “the old dialect,” that is Western Keres, “full of sentences that were involuted with

explanations of their own origins, as if nothing the old man said were his own but all had been said before and he was only to repeat it" (34). Secondly, Old Ku'oosh tells Tayo about a location of which "people said back in the old days they took the scalps and threw them down there. Tayo knew what the old man had come for" (35). Thirdly, Old Ku'oosh talks about the fragility of the world, in which everything is connected. This story is rendered in the following way:

It took a long time to explain the fragility and intricacy because no word exists alone, and the reason for choosing each word had to be explained with a story about why it must be said this certain way. That was the responsibility that went with being human, old Ku'oosh said, the story behind each word must be told so there could be no mistake in the meaning of what had been said; and this demanded great patience and love. More than an hour went by before Ku'oosh asked him.

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In this example, Silko renders an experience of traditional wisdom rather than providing access to traditional sacred knowledge. She renders the story neither in Western Keres, which, according to the description, allows one to connect to age-old meaning, nor does she disclose the sacred location that might have been used for traditional rituals. She also does not provide readers with an extensive explanation of how the world is interconnected in the same careful way that Old Ku'oosh hands on his knowledge to Tayo. On the contrary, she establishes blanks in her text by withholding knowledge from the reader, thereby shaping a central disparity in which the intradiegetic characters are shown to have knowledge of languages, rituals, places and worldviews in which the non-indigenous readers do not partake. She thereby decenters non-indigenous forms of knowledge and privileges those that are able to fill in the narrative gaps, such as that belonging to the Laguna Pueblo people. As Roemer recounts, Silko told participants of a Flagstaff seminar in 1977 that a Laguna Pueblo audience would be able to understand a thirty-page-version of *Ceremony*: "brief references to particular family names and veterans and to specific events in Laguna, Grants, and Gallup, New Mexico, would open up networks of stories, memories, and meanings" (19). According to Roemer, Silko then said that outsiders to this narrative tradition on the contrary continued to face a gap of knowledge "wide enough to swallow hundreds and hundreds of pages" (20). The blanks in the text, the knowledge that remains undisclosed to those uninitiated in the encoded details, is thus substantial and remains a secret within the text. Silko might thereby be considered to curb the curiosity of Western readers to know more about the details that the text withholds – a curiosity,

possibly a nosiness, and eventually the exoticizing disrespect that Allen describes. Still, I would like to suggest that Silko could also be seen as actively and feasibly outlining the limits of non-Laguna Pueblo readers' knowledges. The blanks make tangible that some knowledge has not been disclosed and is not available to non-Laguna Pueblo readers. They constitute a fundamental gap between author, characters and readers, and mark the creative failure of Western readers to fill them in with precise meaning. Simultaneously, the limitations imposed on Western readers are highlighted by showing that indigenous knowledge is not shared precisely because of its devaluation and depreciation in Euro-Western culture.

Still, Silko does make the outcome of indigenous knowledges available, and shows that they can be healing even when confronted with the massive changes on a global scale that, for instance, modern warfare has brought about. This is because Silko discloses, as already stated, the effects of undisclosed traditional knowledge, and arbitrates Tayo's experiences with it. She thereby points to the unique contributions of indigenous peoples, which she evaluates highly, as the development of the storyline shows. At the end of the novel, Tayo regains his health through a ceremony that connects his wellbeing with that of his entire environment, human and non-human actors alike. He is described as sharing the knowledge that he acquired during the ceremony with the elders of his nation. Again, forms of secrecy are enacted that leave those unfamiliar with Laguna Pueblo heritage in the dark. Yet the sharing of secret knowledge is also shown to constitute a community that coincides with the different reading publics of Silko's novel.

To conclude, I would therefore argue that, in *Ceremony*, Silko uses untranslatability as a tool to create different publics that are co-present to each other in a non-hegemonic, post-national community of readers. Those accustomed to traditional Laguna Pueblo stories are asked to activate their knowledge to participate in the storytelling. To others, the value of traditional knowledge is shown. The narrative thereby serves as an entry point into indigenous narratives, but also communicates the non-knowledge of the specific languages, events, places and histories to Euro-Western readers. The theory of untranslatable narrative forms and tropes takes this non-knowledge as its cue for a new reading practice. Stressing those forms and figures in the text that mark the limits of Western, centralized knowledge, reading for the untranslatable facilitates non-appropriative encounters with that which traverses the center. This traversing destroys a clear-cut divide between center and periphery by showing that untranslatable and uncontainable difference is present within cultural hegemony rather than being outside of it at its periphery.

The Destruction of Character in *Almanac of the Dead*

Grand in scope and vast in vision, *Almanac of the Dead* offers a complex analysis of internal colonialism in the American Southwest. Silko enfold a vast panoramic history that spans five hundred years and establishes some seventy characters in this novel. Some of the characters are outright evil, disconnected from any feeling of compassion or connectedness with their compatriots. Others struggle to find their balance in a world that deals out loss and rootlessness. She depicts corrupt officials and businessmen, mafia gangsters and crime lords, drug pushers and addicts, weapon smugglers and human traffickers, eco warriors and a TV psychic. These almost flat characters are used to undermine the novel as a form that transmits bourgeois ambitions, social longings and legitimations. Silko uses character set-up, of central concern to narratology, to weaken the discursive genre of the novel. This has strong ideological effects, since it compromises the powerful link between the Western bourgeoisie and novel writing. The novel traditionally depicts bourgeois social authority, energy and experience through the portrayal of the bourgeoisie's ability to make history and to take over space (see Said). In contrast, Silko puts social conditions and their limitations at the center. Contemporaneous forms of economic and psychic exploitation are established as inseparable from the region's colonial past. This inseparability is stressed by Silko's use of temporalization in the novel, in which past and present, rather than succeeding one other, are co-present and co-constitutive. Frequently, narrative focalizers will be exchanged unannounced, so that readers have to jump involuntarily from one storyline to the next. Through this narrative device, neither the division between past and present nor the clear-cut differentiation between diverse narrative voices can be maintained. Rather, narrators stemming from different timeframes can share stories with each other and be affected by them. Through these narrative devices, Silko establishes temporally and spatially mobile events that characterize a time-span ("the reign of the Death-Eye Dog") that began with the colonizing of the Americas over five hundred years ago. This temporal depiction constitutes a central untranslatability in the *Almanac of the Dead*, remaining incommensurable with both Western notions of linear time and Western notions of subjectivity as independent of its (spatial, human and non-human) surroundings.

As in *Ceremony*, Silko employs American Indian forms of storytelling and conveys the sense that characters act according to their mythical belongings. Characters in myth are usually Gods and Goddesses, human beings and totemic animals, and supernatural heroes and heroines. In myth, characters are

employed to teach people across generations how to live together. In *Almanac of the Dead*, it is taught how a particular reign, that of the Death-Eye Dog, can be overcome, an overcoming that calls for heroic action. Yet Silko defies characterological readings: she does not emphasize *who* defeats Death-Eye Dog's reign, but rather *how* Death-Eye Dog can be defeated, and what it means to succumb to its reign. Silko's characters are designed to make social conditions available, social conditions that are sharply criticized. In the epoch of the Death-Eye Dog, "human beings, especially the alien invaders, would become obsessed with hungers and impulses commonly seen in wild dogs" (251). These alien invaders are human beings "attracted to and excited by death and the sight of blood and suffering" (475, qtd. in Sol 36). And, while these alien invaders – or the colonizers of the Americas – are aligned to the mystical category of the destroyers, they are opposed by those who have somehow escaped being determined by the spirit of their age.

Almanac of the Dead begins with a "Five Hundred Year Map." Plots are represented through dotted lines, characters allocated to place names. As numerous scholars have pointed out, the map assumes that a place – the American Southwest – is peopled; it inscribes indigenous struggles into the representation of a geography (see Anderson; Brigham; Horvitz; Powers). A box (or "legend") announces that the Almanac tells "the future of all the Americas" through "the decipherment of ancient tribal texts" (n. pag.). However, the indigenous almanac within the *Almanac* remains only partly decipherable. Parts of it were lost in ancient times during the tribe's northward flight from Spanish invaders; the remaining parts are within the narrative, deciphered by the drug-abusing psychic Lecha. Lecha's visionary forces are considerably crippled, so her deciphering activity remains unreliable and partial. The box's announcement that historical events are represented by "arcane symbols and old narratives" needs to be read as ironic (n. pag.). As in all of Silko's novels and stories, the almanac's prophecy is incomplete and the "symbols and old narratives" are untranslatable, since their context is missing.

Lecha as a character illustrates well how *Almanac of the Dead* uses narrative conventions to establish a differentiated form of untranslatability that favors indigenous (peripheralized) epistemologies while making the limits of Western knowledge available. Lecha, like all characters, is influenced by the spirit of an age that limits her possibilities of action considerably. While, together with her twin sister Zeta, she is a keeper of the indigenous almanac, her visions are only connected to death and destruction: "They are all dead. The only ones you can locate are dead. Murder victims and suicides. You can't locate the living. If you find them, they will be dead. Those who have lost their loved ones only come to you to confirm their sorrow" (138–39). As Zeta suspects, these

catastrophic visions are imposed on Lecha and she cannot control what she sees. Yet, while Lecha is a medium and a messenger for the dead, she does not kill the living nor does she delight in their death. On the contrary, witnessing their death causes Lecha to lose strength, and she has to constantly battle against the destructive voices inside her head by numbing them with Demerol. Lecha's gift of vision – strongly connected to the spiritual heritage that, like the almanac, she received from her grandmother Yoeme – is a painful burden that she has to carry. Only when she avoids giving in to its alluring forces can she escape becoming one of the destroyers, those characterized as feeding off “energies released by destruction” and “delight[ing] in blood” (336).

Ultimately, *Almanac of the Dead* records, too, the stories of those who have been warned about the destroyers and know how to read the signs of their arrival. Their agency is, however, brought about by the possibilities of communal consciousness. As the character Clinton points out, “African and other tribal people had shared food and wealth in common for thousands of years before the white man Marx came along and stole their ideas for his ‘communes’ and collective farms” (407). And, while Marxism is rejected as an alternative model for living together, indigenous models of being in the world are evaluated highly. As David L. Moore writes, “communitism” remains the ethical ground of *Almanac of the Dead*, a communitism not brought about by the deeds of heroic individuals, but through a radical interconnectedness of all beings belonging to the earth. “The earth is worth protecting, and humans are part of the earth” (2014: n. pag.), he writes, and this radical interdependency of all life is what needs to be affirmed. *Almanac of the Dead's* neglect of character development in favor of interconnectedness (through time and space) makes available to its readers that indigenous spiritual understandings have been there all along. Equally, it asks Western readers to engage with worldviews unfamiliar to them that they might not fully understand. This form of untranslatability is enabling, as it might evoke a different form of relationality with the topics displayed in a novel. Rather than identifying with a character, readers might agree with its analysis of a fundamental interdependency of all beings, an interdependency that Silko expresses through the interconnectedness of different times and spaces. When that happens, the novel itself becomes a semiotic machine able to evoke imaginings that allows them to keep “words, phrases, and gestures of human solidarity” threatened with extinction by the relentless actions of destructive forces unleashed by an Integrated World Capitalism that in Félix Guattari's analysis impoverishes the ability of human beings to connect to their environment, since it singularizes individuals, and it standardizes and thereby disciplines and moulds behavior (20).

In *Almanac of the Dead*, the destroyers' opponents in the ending's grand showdown gather in a tacky congress center. They include the twin sisters Lecha and Zeta, the drug pusher Mosca, the revolutionary La Escapia and the Barefoot Hopi, who all meet at the International Holistic Healer Convention in Tucson to combine forces. While remaining vague about whether the opposing protagonists will be able to overthrow the destroyers, at this point Silko's narrative method is more than clear. As Meredith Tax comments, it is its "alternating currents of irony and crackpot occultism, pity and disgust, common sense and messianic vision" that show Silko's intention to suck readers "in only to tip them off balance, the purpose being not to make them identify but to make them think" (61). Silko invites readers to share in her analysis of an interconnectedness of different times, spaces, peoples and the environment, and she entices her readers to share the hope that Death-Eye Dog and his seven brothers can be overcome. The destroyers' deeds are paralleled by heroic events brought about by those who oppose them. To be affected by this hope is the novel's ultimate goal.

Conclusion: Traversing the Center

I have discussed two novels by the American Indian author Leslie Marmon Silko to show how forms of secrecy create a multi-cultural semiotics in which different (un)translatable notions exist next to each other. Silko's literary works arbitrate incommensurability; they incite Western readers to encounter indigenous knowledges and the possibilities for healing they entail, without allowing them to decipher all the gaps created in the text. When readers are confronted with (un)translatability, reading becomes a dialogue without the safety net of interpretative closure. And, while this refusal to offer a definite meaning might be understood as a failure, I want to posit that it incites readers to reflect upon their limits of knowing and being in the world. The "speed bumps of untranslatability" (Apter) are thus productive forms of interruption, since they allow, for instance in the case of indigenous authors, an acknowledgement of the possibilities inherent in knowledges from peripheralized, non-Western contexts.

Significantly, Silko's works have a reach far beyond their original context. They circulate on the global literary market – by being translated into numerous languages. This circulation exemplifies how indigenous notions that cannot be simply appropriated and subsumed under Euro-Western ways of knowing and being, and that show the limits of Euro-Western understanding are available

worldwide, thereby disturbing simplifying notions of center and periphery. The chosen works make a definition of globalization available as proposed by James Clifford, namely as “the multidirectional, unrepresentable sum of material and cultural relationships linking places and people, distant and nearby” (6). Silko’s works have an important role to play in shaping these global “cultural relationships.” Readers’ responses within and about incommensurability are evoked; the chosen works activate untranslatability and make it into a force that can withstand attempts to coerce their forms of transmitting knowledge under the denominator of the already known. In Silko’s works, untranslatability is used to forge readerly encounters with uncontainable difference, a forging that suggests an ethical approach to alterity that seems necessary for any democratic proceedings (see Spivak 2013; Wiese).

To conclude, I would like to return to the “political theory of untranslatability” proposed by the editors of the *Dictionary of Untranslatables* (xv). According to this political notion, cultural expressions can remain different, are unappropriate and can add a distinct voice to the global, babylonian, expressive choir that persists in language – and, as I would like to add, in literary forms. I want to connect this political notion of untranslatability to the specific stumbling block that any thinking about the distinctiveness of indigenous peoples evokes and that disturbs any easy assumptions about centers and peripheries. Firstly, indigenous peoples posit a challenge to the contemporary thinking of the nation-state and its relation to colonialism, since they often act independently within and across national borders. This is the case because indigenous peoples can have an independent sovereign status within nation-states while simultaneously being oriented towards transindigeneity. Secondly, their historical and continuous presence on their native land undercuts national myths of conquest, namely that European settlers were setting foot on virgin land or, as it has been called in juridical terms, *terra nullius*. Thirdly, they challenge assumptions that relegate colonialism safely to the past: the ongoing dispossession of indigenous land and the grave human right violations against indigenous peoples show that colonial systems of domination are still in place on a worldwide scale. Fourthly, the self-determination of indigenous peoples destroys images of otherness. As Jody Byrd shows throughout *The Transit of Empire*, notions of Indians and Indianness need to be continuously constructed as “past tense presences,” a logic that relies on the “derealization of the Other” (193, 179). In Judith Butler’s terms, any hegemonic construction relies on its own iterability and is therefore fundamentally vulnerable to re-significations. This is also true of constructions of the settler colonial state. To rely on images of otherness ultimately means to be threatened by failure, especially if this “Other”

manages to become visible as a political, autonomous subject in her or his own right, as has been the case recently, for instance, with the Idle No More movement in Canada.

For this re-signification of indigeneity, literary discourse is a powerful tool. The presence of disturbing elements in Silko's novels reminds readers of the survivance of American Indian nations in general and of their distinct storytelling traditions in particular. Untranslatable notions "overturn the static reduction of native identities" and disrupt hegemonic constructions of American Indians as remnants of the past relegated to a peripheral existence that does not warrant attention or care (Vizenor 1989: 142). The novels of indigenous peoples in general and of Leslie Marmon Silko in particular are traversing the global and, as such, claim an undeniable presence within what is considered the center and the periphery, while also shifting their boundaries and relation. When literary texts such as Leslie Marmon Silko's show that indigenous knowledges are present within society and do matter, they trouble homogenizing globalization processes and invest the perceived periphery with vision by showing indigenous persistence, resilience and creativity.

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