



Walking and Learning with Indigenous Peoples

A Contribution to the 5th Anniversary of the International Summer
Program on Indigenous Peoples' Rights and Policy at Columbia University

Pamela Calla and Elsa Stamatopoulou (Eds.)

 COLUMBIA | CSER
Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race

 IS
HR
Institute for
the study of
human rights

Title: Walking and Learning with Indigenous Peoples

A Contribution to the 5th Anniversary of the International Summer Program on Indigenous Peoples' Rights and Policy at Columbia University

Editors: Pamela Calla and Elsa Stamatopoulou

Copy Editor: Shayna Halliwell

Artwork for the Book Cover: Anthony McKnight (The Lyrebird within Me)

Explanation of the artwork by the artist appears at the beginning of the book.

Cover design: Andrew Rizzardi

Published by: Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race and the Institute for the Study of Human Rights, Columbia University

Academic Commons: Columbia University

ISBN: 978-0-692-09427-3

Place of Publication: New York, USA

Index terms: Indigenous peoples, indigenous studies, international law, indigenous peoples' rights, human rights

Geographical area: World

Web: www.cser.columbia.edu and www.humanrightscolumbia.org

From Margins to Center: Untranslatability as a Decolonial Practice

Doro Wiese

Abstract

This essay takes possible constraints, experienced by Euro-Western readers, in understanding Indigenous articulations as a point of departure. It is argued that the limitations experienced when interacting across cultures are productive since they limn and contour the limits of knowledge and challenge Euro-Western hegemonies. When working across languages, the impossibility of transferring meaning from one culture to the next is called untranslatability. Taking the literary works of Native American Renaissance writer Leslie Marmon Silko as an example, the critical scholarship on her oeuvre is taken one step further by connecting it with the seminal discussion on untranslatability currently being led in Comparative Literature. The main goal is to establish untranslatable narrative notions as an analytical object for reading literature across cultures. It is posited that narrative expressions can remain culturally specific and unappropriable when untranslatable. To read for untranslatability and to highlight it therewith means to stress the singularity of cultures. Their uniqueness continues to exist even when cultural artefacts circulate as world literature on a global literary market. To show the validity of the main idea on the productiveness of untranslatability, a close reading of Silko's novels *Ceremony* and *Almanac of the Dead* will show how the untranslatability of narrative expressions is achieved in these works.

I. Introduction

Whoever enters the keywords "American Indians" or "Native Americans" on Google Images' search tool will inevitably encounter a multitude of images that depict noble men with feather headdresses, possibly on horses, or pretty women in flattering leather clothing. These images have little in common with the reality of American Indians. However, they have an important effect: they represent American Indians as peoples that belong to another era and who are a remainder of the past. This representation is so resoundingly successful that Euro-Western ignorance about the distinct social, political, and cultural differences of Indigenous Peoples prevail, although there are worldwide more than 370 million Indigenous persons, with 567 legally recognized tribes in the USA alone. How can this unawareness of cultural differences be alleviated when encounters with unfamiliar forms of social or cultural expression point towards the inadequacy of Euro-Western traditions of thinking and imaging? In this essay, this question is given a new and original twist. It is argued that it is precisely the encounter with untranslatable notions that can eventually provoke important insights, for instance by limning and contouring the limits of one's own knowledge. This entails non-knowledge no longer being seen as a failure, but rather as an indicator for the presence of untranslatable notions that can be discerned. It is proposed that reading fictional works of the Native American Renaissance writer Leslie Marmon Silko can give rise to encounters with untranslatable notions which this author initiates through form and style.

Focusing on the repercussions of geopolitically specific, but globally circulating, literature by the American Indian author Silko, this essay connects questions of narrativity to political agendas of social justice, Indigenous sovereignty, and cultural

autonomy as expressed in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).¹ While the UNDRIP is first and foremost a legal and political instrument that helps to redress and prevent historical, political, and social injustices and human rights violations, it is also a declaration which highlights, strengthens, and supports Indigenous knowledge systems and forms of artistic expressions. When literary texts of Indigenous writers like Leslie Marmon Silko show that Indigenous knowledges are present within society and do matter, they trouble Euro-Western hegemony, oppose homogenizing globalization processes and display a liberatory vision by showing Indigenous persistence, resilience and creativity. Leslie Marmon Silko thereby puts into practice what the UNDRIP aims to achieve in legal terms. The presence of disturbing elements in the novels of Silko, herself of Pueblo Laguna and German ancestry, reminds readers of the survivance of American Indian nations in general and of their distinct story-telling traditions in particular. Untranslatable notions overturn what the Anishinaabe writer and scholar Gerard Vizenor has called “the static reduction of native identities.”² For this re-signification of indigeneity, literary discourse is a powerful tool. 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 of Indigenous knowledge in the world.

II. A Broader View of Untranslatability

The Dictionary of Untranslatables refers to the concept of untranslatability as an indicator of the inherent dangers associated with sense-making.³ Sense-making is the ongoing and fragile process of transferring meaning, which is complicated when working across languages and cultures where it is constantly threatened with the loss of meaning and coherence. However, in the act of reading fiction, readers are asked to make sense not only of the meaning of the words but also of “the use of vocabulary, syntax, semantics, characters, narration, and plot—the whole configuration of the fictional text’s chronotopical world.”⁴ Just as with certain untranslatable words, these are areas in which the attempt at sense-making can fail and where narrative construction can create an instance of untranslatability. Lawrence Venuti, however, sees value in untranslatables as useful tools for remembering and challenging the legacy of colonial and ethnocentric violence upon which Euro-Western literature was founded.⁵ He argues that although translations are seen as successful when they allow the reader to forget that they are reading a translation rather than the original work, this leads translators to produce accessible and easily understood works, reinforcing the economy of violence through the erasure of any cultural difference or concept that is not easily understood by the target culture. Venuti asserts that a translation that centers on the cultural difference

¹ United Nations General Assembly, *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, United Nations Document A/RES/61/295 (October 2007).

² Gerard Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (Lincoln, USA: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 142.

³ Barbara Cassins, Emily Apter, and Jacques Lezra, *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* (Princeton, USA: Princeton University Press, 2014), passim.

⁴ Doro Wiese, *The Powers of the False. Reading, Writing, Thinking Beyond Truth and Fiction* (Evanston, USA: Northwestern University Press, 2014), 6.

⁵ Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation* (New York, USA: Routledge, 1995), passim; Lawrence Venuti, *The Scandals of Translation. Towards an Ethics of Difference* (London, United Kingdom: Routledge, 1998), passim; *The Translation Studies Readers*, ed. Lawrence Venuti, (London, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2000), passim.

of the original can challenge the economy of violence⁶ and can remind readers of the heterogeneity of discourses by admitting that the translation is a translation.⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in “The Politics of Translation,” posits that if translators do not focus on making the words and concepts in a translation fit neatly into the hegemonic discourse of the target culture, translations allow for “the experience of contained alterity in an unknown language spoken in a different cultural milieu.”⁸ In this way, untranslatables can be cross-cultural points of encounter.

I would further argue that certain crucial information is hidden or distorted by Leslie Marmon Silko—herself of Laguna Pueblo and German ancestry—in her novels, leading to certain significant textual meaning being available only to those who have cultural familiarity with the relevant Indigenous belief systems and practices, such as certain oral traditions. The novel can then evoke distinct reactions depending on the reader’s ability or inability to access the hidden components of the narrative. Readers, particularly Euro-Western, non-Indigenous ones who cannot access the narrative elements that are not made available to them, are nonetheless aware that there is something there that remains inexplicable. In this way, readers are confronted with the experience of untranslatability, an experience which can destabilize and de-center Euro-Western, privileged forms of knowledge production and transmission. In contrast, readers who have a background and experience with the Indigenous worldviews used in Silko’s work may be able to gain access to those elements of the narrative strategically left unwritten by being able to fill in the missing pieces based on contextual and cultural knowledge. By further examining these narrative elements, it becomes possible to recognize them and the forms of untranslatability they may create.

The use of untranslatability within narrative structure and storytelling is especially important given the current debates regarding ideas of difference, specifically within the field of world literature. Emily Apter makes the point that the field of world literature must be made aware of the ways that it can play into the marketing of differences. In various texts, as well as in her latest piece, *Against World Literature*, she warns against “zoom[ing] over the speed bumps of untranslatability to cover ground.”⁹ Untranslatability can be a form of resistance against the appropriative tendency of the world literature field since, as Apter argues, the language-specific element of any sort of meaning is lost when the text is translated or taken out of its original context. Apter posits that untranslatable words or concepts are a clearer instance of the approximating nature of sense-making. Sense-making is always translation and therefore always approximate, since any use of language to convey knowledge, whether that is philosophical, literary, or cultural knowledge, gives only the illusion of creating a general understanding capable of being free from contextual and linguistic specificity. The ideas put forth by Apter regarding untranslatability form part of a dynamic debate within the field of comparative literature and the problematics involved in the relationships with power. As many in the field are aware, the use of the broad category

⁶ *The Translator’s Invisibility*, *supra* note 5.

⁷ *The Scandals of Translation*, *supra* note 5.

⁸ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “The Politics of Translation,” in *Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates*, eds. Michele Barrett and Ann Phillips (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity Books, 1992), 179.

⁹ Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (New York, USA: Verso Books, 2013), 3.

of world literature is an example of this power relationship, since, although it creates the illusion that the field is free from a history and practice of Eurocentrism, in reality the field still centers on Euro-Western literature and analysis. The first compilations of world literature were published at the end of the Second World War and focused on European and Judeo-Christian works. This focus, unsurprising given that most of the authors and scholars were of European origin, has changed in subsequent years when it became more common to teach comparative literature in the United States.¹⁰

Currently, as a consequence of multicultural and postcolonial analysis and critiques, the texts selected for publication in world literature anthologies are much less focused on European and settler-colonial texts. However, the field is still apprehensive of the dangers pointed out by Erich Auerbach in his famous essay “Philology and Weltliteratur,” in which homogenization is posited as a possible downfall for world literature. In his idea of homogenization, globalization has created “a single literary culture, only a few literary languages and perhaps even a single literary language.”¹¹ The idea of untranslatability is important precisely because the untranslatable resists appropriation into such a homogenized literary language and instead highlights cultural differences.

Following from Auerbach’s notion of the danger of homogenization through globalization, I suggest that attention must also be paid to narrative forms and tropes, which are also potential points of resistance to narrative structures in Euro-Western literary tradition. Varied narrative and storytelling structures broaden ideas about literature and what it means to be literary, and can be as much a consequence and signifier of situatedness of different worldviews and cultural specificity as can be words and concepts. Including narrative forms and tropes within the realm of the untranslatable seems to align with the aims of the *Dictionary of Untranslatables* to create a “political theory of community,” surpassing “the limits of discrete national languages and traditions.”¹² Creating space for perspectives that cannot be goes beyond the scope and bounds of language. According to this theory, untranslatables make the audience conscious of uncontainable differences, both in linguistic and cultural terms, and highlight the possibility of forming bonds through these differences and beyond the ideas of nation-states, in which non-hegemonic difference cannot be erased, reduced, appropriated, or controlled.

Narrative forms are varied and possess an untranslatable quality. For readers unfamiliar with a specific narrative form, this can accentuate the puzzle created by the text. For example, the narrative form used by Silko is vital to how readers experience her work. Her use of untranslatable narrative forms highlights the cultural traditions and advancements of American Indians, while simultaneously respecting the need to maintain certain knowledge as untranslatable to a Euro-Western audience. Silko's work expands upon the democratic project tied up with untranslatability without falling into exoticization or what Anishinabe writer and scholar Gerard Vizenor refers to as

¹⁰ *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, eds. Theo D'haen, David Damrosch, and Djelal Kadir, (New York, USA: Routledge, 2012), passim.

¹¹ Erich Auerbach, “Philology and Weltliteratur,” trans. Maire Said and Edward Said, *The Centennial Review* 13, no. 1 (1969), 129.

¹² *Supra* note 3, at xv.

“portraits of dominance.”¹³ Silko makes use of the untranslatable and makes it clear in her writing that American Indians form part of present day life, and while they have experiences, traditions, worldviews and knowledge that resist translation, and therefore appropriation, they are nevertheless present within the canon of North American literature. A closer reading of *Ceremony* and *Almanac of the Dead* by Leslie Marmon Silko illustrates how the use of storytelling narratives rooted in oral traditions can cause a sense of disorientation for Euro-Western readers.¹⁴ The untranslatability of worldscapes that do not privilege self-evident Euro-Western linguistic and conceptual frameworks can simultaneously allow for the construction of Indigenous histories, which can circulate within the centered, hegemonic spaces, creating alternative worldscapes. These worldscapes make distinct Indigenous storytelling traditions visible, and thereby “manifest, practice, develop and teach” what the UNDRIP wants to protect and maintain.¹⁵

III. Obscured Meanings in Silko's *Ceremony*

In 1996, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* was identified as one of the four most important publications in modern American literature by members of the Modern Language Association and has received widespread critical acclaim and a worldwide readership.¹⁶ Kenneth M. Roemer writes in “Silko's Arroyos as Mainstream” that the novel was able to connect with a wider spectrum of readers due to certain key global developments taking place simultaneously. The civil rights' and women's movements sparked greater dialogue on issues of social justice, a focus that reached the academy, especially in certain fields such as literary studies. In the 1970s, for example, there was much more criticism in the academy about what was considered to be part of the canon and there was an increasing openness to examine works from new or previously excluded writers. Such well-known publications as the *Library Journal*, *The Choice*, *Newsweek* and *The New York Times Book Review* spoke highly of *Ceremony* upon its release.¹⁷ Perhaps this is because the novel manages to draw both from elements familiar within Euro-Western narrative forms, such as the Bildungsroman, and those from Laguna Pueblo and Navajo oral traditions and characters, in a way that created enough of a departure from the Eurocentric style to be interesting for Euro-Western readers while still allowing them to feel they could identify with the narrative style.¹⁸ At the same time, its narrative about the traumatized war veteran also resonated with contemporary concerns about the effects of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder on Vietnam veterans. While 15.2% of returning Vietnam veterans were diagnosed with mental health issues, the same statistic for minorities was much higher. This is perhaps due to the trauma of various layers of racism and additional barriers to being able to re-enter

¹³ Gerard Vizenor, “Fugitive Poses,” in *Fugitive Poses. Native American Indian Scenes of Absence and Presence* (Lincoln, USA: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 152.

¹⁴ Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York, USA: Penguin, 1977); Leslie Marmon Silko, *Almanac of the Dead* (New York, USA: Simon & Schuster, 1991).

¹⁵ *Supra* note 1, at Art. 12.

¹⁶ Kenneth M. Roemer, “Silko's Arroyos as Mainstream: Processes and Implications of Canonical Identity,” in *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 45, no. 1 (1999), 9.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

civil society. As these forms of discrimination are key themes in the narrative of *Ceremony*, the book became all the more relevant at the time of its 1977 publication.

Ceremony distinctly manages to blend its use of traditional Indigenous storytelling tropes and archetypal characters within Euro-Western narrative forms such as the Bildungsroman. Despite this, as scholar, professor and writer Paula Gunn Allen remarks, it is very difficult to discuss *Ceremony* with most students in the classroom. The novel contains stories from the Laguna Pueblo tradition that are considered inside knowledge of the Laguna Pueblo people that are not to be transmitted to broader audiences. Rather than explaining aspects of Laguna Pueblo culture and spirituality to her students who might exoticize the latter, Gunn Allen focuses instead on the narrative form. In this way, she can deflect the appropriative and exotifying curiosity of 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.”¹⁹ She recognizes that those not coming from an Indigenous Navajo and Laguna Pueblo cultural heritage may treat these traditions, stories, and spiritualities “as though they were simply curios, artifacts, fetishes ... objects of interest and patronization” rather than powerful ways of conceiving the world.²⁰ David L. Moore responds to these concerns in “Rough Knowledge and Radical Understanding: Sacred Silence in American Indian Literatures,” arguing that these are different perspectives on the practice of storytelling and that while Allen focuses her analysis on cultural ownership and issues of appropriation in content, Silko emphasizes, especially in her discussion of mythopoetics, the importance of the practice of storytelling and challenges the idea of a static content, context, or use of traditional stories, arguing that they are constantly in flux.²¹ It is possible to connect these two arguments through the discussion of untranslatability. Gunn Allen is perhaps being particularly cautious of invasive and exotifying portrayals or discussions of Laguna Pueblo culture by non-Laguna people, which could come as a consequence of Silko’s use of Laguna Pueblo mythology. But a close reading of *Ceremony* reveals that this may obscure a very strategic exposure of Indigenous myths and knowledge that deliberately form a carefully constructed yet incomplete picture. The story of Tayo offers an example. Tayo, a mixed-blood member of the Pueblo community, returns to his reservation after fighting abroad in World War II. He finds himself suffering from an unknown sickness that leads to constant vomiting and is plagued by unrelenting images of war and a feeling of unresolved grief that causes his family to seek the help of the medicine man, or traditional healer, named Old Ku’oosh. There are three important elements in the interaction between Tayo and Old Ku’oosh: first, we see Old Ku’oosh speaking to Tayo in “the old dialect,” Western Keres, which is “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.”²² Second, Old Ku’oosh describes a place that “people said back in the old days they took the scalps and threw them down there. Tayo knew what the old

¹⁹ Paula Gunn Allen, “Special Problems in Teaching Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*,” *American Indian Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (1990), 382.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 383.

²¹ David L. Moore, “Rough Knowledge and Radical Understanding: Sacred Silence in American Indian Literatures,” *American Indian Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (1997), 633-62.

²² Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*, *supra* note 14, at 34.

man had come for.”²³ And finally, Old Ku’oosh speaks about the interconnected, interdependent nature of the world:

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.²⁴

In this way, Silko is able to convey the feeling of experiencing an encounter with traditional wisdom, and some of its core ideas, without revealing traditional knowledge that is not meant to be shared. Since she does not write in Western Keres, which carries age-old meaning intrinsically in its form, and she does not reveal the place spoken about by Old Ku’oosh, which may have been a sacred ritual site, and she does not explain the ways in which everything in the world is interconnected, as Old Ku’oosh did for Tayo, she does not make this knowledge available to readers. By doing this, it is clear that there are knowledges and practices that can and have been passed on, but in this context, the knowledges and practices themselves are not revealed, which creates certain strategic gaps in the narrative whose content is only available to readers who have the Indigenous knowledge necessary to fill them in. In this way, Silko centers Indigenous forms of knowledge and experience and allows for a greater understanding to be available to those who can fill in the blank spaces, namely those of the Laguna Pueblo people. This was done quite purposefully. Roemer tells us of the time that Silko, in a Flagstaff seminar in 1977, stated that a thirty-page version of her novel *Ceremony* could be understood by a Laguna Pueblo reader: “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.”²⁵ Roemer also recalls that Silko went on to say that readers not of Pueblo Laguna cultural origin faced a knowledge gulf “wide enough to swallow hundreds and hundreds of pages.”²⁶ The gaps created in the text, containing that undisclosed knowledge unavailable to those unable to decode its specificity, is vast and remains hidden within the text. While some might say that Silko could be seen as satisfying the curiosity of readers eager to glean the knowledge of the American Indian experience, often in the fetishizing and exoticizing way described by Gunn Allen, I posit that Silko is instead highlighting the boundaries of which knowledge can and cannot be shared outside the Laguna Pueblo communities for her Euro-Western readers. These instances of withheld knowledge in the text are visceral markers indicating that there is something there that remains hidden and unavailable to readers who do not have the Laguna Pueblo cultural knowledge, and these markers operate to demarcate a difference between the characters and author, and the reader. The limitation to textual access emphasizes the need to retain certain knowledge in order to safeguard it from the appropriation, exoticization and devaluation of the cultural production of Indigenous Peoples by European and Euro-Western

²³ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 35-36.

²⁵ *Supra* note 16, at 19.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

culture. Silko's textual strategies are thereby in line with the UNDRIP, as the Declaration also stresses that Indigenous Peoples have a right "to maintain, protect, and have access in privacy to their religious and cultural sites" in order to safeguard what is sacred from (cultural and economic) appropriation.²⁷

Even though specific knowledge remains hidden and only indicated textually, Silko does share some of the core ideas and consequences of this knowledge with her readers. Her description of how Tayo experiences this knowledge illustrates its healing potential, even in the face of massive global warfare and destruction. Through storytelling, she is showing how Indigenous knowledge is highly valuable and crucial. Tayo, for example, recovers from his suffering after a ceremony is conducted in which his connection to the human and non-human world around him is revealed to him and he comes to understand that not only does his welfare depend on these connections, but also that all of these other elements suffer when he is not well. With this understanding, he is then able to pass on the knowledge that he gains through this ceremony to the elders of his nation, meaning he not only receives knowledge but also contributes to it. Once again, we see here how information is withheld from readers who do not have access to the Laguna Pueblo traditions, since the reader does not know what the ceremony entails nor what specific knowledge is gained from it. But it is possible to understand how the act of sharing secret knowledge is yet another form of creating and strengthening community, something that occurs within the varied community memberships to which any reader of the novel may belong.

Finally, for Silko, untranslatability is used as a way to create simultaneous but distinct experiences for different readers in a way that challenges hegemonies based on Euro-Western centrality. Readers who are familiar with Laguna Pueblo storytelling and culture are invited to use this knowledge to become active participants in filling in the missing elements of the text through these traditions. For other readers, these gaps are a way to indicate the value of this hidden traditional knowledge, which not only highlights the value of traditional knowledge but makes the lack of knowledge evident to Euro-Western readers unfamiliar with these Indigenous languages, histories, sites, and mythologies. In this way, the use of this specific form of narrative structure creates differentiated accesses to Indigenous knowledge as a key element in a new practice of reading, which uses the narrative form to delineate the boundaries of Euro- and Euro-Western-centric knowledge. The use of untranslatability can create spaces in which Indigenous knowledge is valued, and brought into the center, without appropriating it. This practice also helps to break down the binary between center and margin by showing the untranslatable as part of the cultural hegemony rather than only existing in the periphery. Indigenous story telling is shown to traverse the center as it points to the presence of an untranslatable and uncontainable difference in its midst.

IV. *Almanac of the Dead* and the End of the Death-Eye Dog

Almanac of the Dead, a multi-generational epic chronology, spins a web of interconnecting stories that unfold over the course of the 500-year history of colonization in the US-American Southwest and Mexico. The storyline of Silko's novel creates a complex and multi-layered analysis of internal colonialism in this region. While some of the seventy or so characters fit neatly into the archetypes of good or evil,

²⁷ *Supra* note 1, at Art. 12.

other characters are portrayed in a more nuanced and dynamic manner, trying to find their way as they struggle with complex moral dilemmas in the face of situations of precarity, homelessness, and loss. Among her characters can be found corrupt government officials and corporate businessmen, Mafiosos, drug lords and addicts, clandestine arms dealers, human traffickers, environmental activists and a television psychic. Most characters remain underdeveloped, having defined roles that rely heavily on archetypes. This form of character portrayal can be seen as an attempt to fight the use of the novel as a medium for 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 Euro-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, as Edward Said has claimed.²⁸ Silko, however, centers the focus on social conditions and their limitations, and uses temporality to show that current socioeconomic conditions and forms of exploitation and inequality are inseparable from the colonial past. She delineates a five-hundred-year time period between the present day and the colonization of the Americas which she calls "the reign of the Death-Eye Dog." She uses a non-linear concept of time, portraying the storylines as interwoven strands, just as her narrative switches voices, storylines, and temporal settings to emphasize these connections and to challenge the division between past and present. The non-linear concept of time is one of the central untranslatable elements in the *Almanac of the Dead*. This clashes with Euro-Western ideas of linear time and the idea that individual subjectivity is something that is acted on, but separate from, its geographic, environmental, and temporal location.

Almanac of the Dead, like *Ceremony*, draws on the American Indian oral tradition. The characters, as in mythology, are used as archetypes to teach about life, and to display certain characteristics and their consequences. Mythical characters—often gods, animals, or heroic or villainous creatures—teach lessons about moral and ethical behavior or society and encourage heroic deeds. Here the lesson is how to resist and end the reign of the Death-Eye Dog. However, Silko defies archetypical ideas of a hero—there is no single hero taking action, but rather there is a process and a collection of intertwined characters that she uses to illustrate and criticize social conditions. For example, she writes about the post-colonization period of the Death-Eye Dog, when "human beings, especially the alien invaders, would become obsessed with hungers and impulses commonly seen in wild dogs,"²⁹ and would be "attracted to and excited by death and the sight of blood and suffering."³⁰ The "alien invaders" are, of course, the European colonizers, whose identity is that of the destroyers and who are opposed by those who have the vision to recognize the power of resistance.

A "Five Hundred Year Map" is found at the beginning of *Almanac of the Dead*, to help readers navigate the vast scope of the text and the various intertwined storylines spread out over the centuries. The storylines are laid out in dotted lines and characters are identified according to location. It is important to note that this map acknowledges the land as being populated (in contrast to the "settler discourse"), and includes

²⁸ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London, United Kingdom: Vintage, 1993).

²⁹ Leslie Marmon Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, *supra* note 14, at 251.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 475.

Indigenous resistance in its depiction of the American Southwest. According to the legend, the map lays out “the future of all the Americas” through “the decipherment of ancient tribal texts.” Despite this, parts of the *Almanac* presented in the text remain difficult to decipher. In the novel, the *Almanac* is described as being incomplete, with sections of it having been lost over the course of the centuries as the *Almanac*’s caretakers fled from the Spanish invasion. However, the remaining text, decoded by the drug addicted psychic Lecha was also difficult to understand. Lecha’s visionary capabilities are considerably crippled, impacting her deciphering activity, which remains unreliable and partial. The map’s legend also mentions that historical events are indicated by “arcane symbols and old narratives,” a claim that should be interpreted as irony. Once again, Silko is purposefully hiding certain parts of the sacred texts and prophecies. Even the “symbols and old narratives” are incomplete and untranslatable, being so far outside their context and frames of reference.³¹

The character Lecha illustrates how Silko employs specific literary conventions to allow space for the untranslatable in which historically marginalized Indigenous knowledges are centered and gaps in Euro-Western knowledge and understanding are revealed. Lecha, like all characters in *Almanac of the Dead*, is influenced by the spirit of an age that considerably limits her possibilities of action. Lecha, and her twin sister Zeta who is an arms dealer, have received part of the ancient almanac from their grandmother Yoeme. But in addition to being entrusted with the almanac, Lecha also has visions, albeit visions that are bleak and full of death: “They are all dead. The only ones you [i.e. Lecha herself] 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.”³² Lecha has no control over the content of her visions, however disturbing they may be, and although she is able to communicate with, and speak for, the dead, her role as a constant witness to death causes her to become weaker. As this becomes too much to bear, Lecha takes to using Demerol to dull the destructive and tragic visions, the pain of her gift of clairvoyance and the burden of the almanac. She must resist the allure of her visions if she is to avoid becoming a destroyer, those who “delight in blood” and “energies released by destruction.”³³

Almanac of the Dead also acknowledges the histories of those who had been able to foresee the arrival of the destroyers. However, we know about them only through what remains in the oral tradition of the collective 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.”³⁴ Though Marxism is regarded critically in the novel, there is a longing expressed for other ways of living collectively with special value being placed on the cooperative organization of Indigenous societies. David A. Moore puts forth the idea of “communitism” as the core ethical motive presented in *Almanac of the Dead*. This sort of communitism does not

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 138-39.

³³ *Ibid.*, 336.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 407.

involve a vanguard or individual heroism, but rather a constant consciousness of the profound connection and interdependency of all beings together with the earth and nature. As he explains, “[t]he earth is worth protecting, and humans are part of the earth”³⁵; this extensive interconnection of all life is vital. While the characters in *Almanac of the Dead* may come across as one-dimensional and lacking development, this has been a choice to privilege the special and temporal interconnectedness that illustrates the consistent presence of Indigenous worldviews and asks non-Indigenous readers to engage with these spiritual ideas even though they may seem quite unfamiliar. In this way, untranslatability may give readers the chance to form a distinct relationship with ideas presented in the novel, such as the profound interconnectedness with the world, rather than simply identifying with a character. When readers can identify with these concepts, the novel can serve as a semiotic device evoking “words, phrases, and gestures of human solidarity”³⁶ that are crucial for realizing the rights of Indigenous individuals and collectives that are formulated in the UNDRIP. It evokes recognition and respect for “indigenous knowledge, cultures and traditional practices” that contribute, as the UNDRIP makes clear, “to sustainable and equitable development and proper management of the environment.”³⁷

The final climax of *Almanac of the Dead* poises the world on the verge of an epic battle between the destroyers and their opponents, when Lecha and Zeta, the prison activist Barefoot Hopi, the revolutionary La Escapia, and the drug dealer Mosca, come together during the International Holistic Healer Convention in Tucson. The outcome of this final confrontation is not made clear because the actions of the destroyers and their opponents counterbalance each other. Silko uses “alternating currents of irony and crackpot occultism, pity and disgust, common sense and messianic vision” in her narration to pull readers in “only to tip them off balance, the purpose being not to make them identify but to make them think.”³⁸ She uses her narrative threads to share her vision of the strands of connection woven through time, space, beings, and with the land and environment, and she involves readers in the desire to see the end of the reign of Death Eye Dog and his seven brothers. To perch readers on the verge of this final showdown and to infect them with hope of a better world is, I would argue, the ultimate aim of the novel. It is perfectly clear that this aim can only be reached when Indigenous knowledges, worldviews, and ways of life are safeguarded, respected, welcomed, and recognized, as asked by the UNDRIP.

V. Conclusion: Centering the Margin

I have used the examples of two novels by Leslie Marmon Silko to look at the role of making knowledge or meaning unavailable in order to create multiple and parallel narratives that exist simultaneously within the same text, as a purposeful aspect of untranslatability. Silko uses this tactic to create a moment of encounter and illustration of the existence, power, resistance and importance of Indigenous culture and knowledges, without making them available to the Euro-Western reader or providing an

³⁵ David L. Moore, “The Ground of Ethics: Arrowboy’s Ecologic in *Almanac*,” in *Howling for Justice: New Perspectives on Leslie Marmon Silko’s ‘Almanac of the Dead,’* ed. Rebecca Tillett (Tucson, USA: University of Arizona Press, 2014), no. pag.

³⁶ Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, (London, United Kingdom: Continuum, 2008), 20.

³⁷ *Supra* note 1, at Annex.

³⁸ Meredith Tax, “Return of the Native Americans: Leslie Marmon Silko,” *Voice Literary Supplement*, (November 1999), <http://www.meredithtax.org/writers/return-native-americans-leslie-marmon-silko>.

easy roadmap to navigate that which is hidden in the text. This exposes the untranslatable elements to the reader without handing them the keys to decipher them, creating an experience where reading becomes an act of encounter with selective access to meaning. Within Euro-Western narrative traditions, this may be seen as a failure of narrative clarity; however, I argue instead that it is a means of encouraging critical reflection on different forms and availability of knowledge, which ultimately decenters Euro-Western forms of knowledge and worldviews. I see Silko using these “speed bumps of untranslatability”³⁹ to incite this reflection in an attempt to spark understanding for, and appreciation of, Indigenous worldviews, and the knowledges and healing potential that are present in these forms of knowing and being. Untranslatability is therefore an important tool for maintaining the rights of Indigenous Peoples to be “equal to all other peoples” while promoting recognition that all peoples are different, and all peoples have the right “to consider themselves different, and to be respected as such,” as stated in the Annex of the UNDRIP.⁴⁰

Silko’s novels have been translated into many languages and she has a readership that spans the continents. Her novels have brought ideas of Indigenous culture and vision to a very broad audience. However, by carefully keeping critical knowledge hidden from the reader, she protects this knowledge from being appropriated or overtaken in ways historically common to the European or Euro-Western culture of consumption, while simultaneously challenging readers to be open to non-Western forms of knowledge and narration. Silko’s work illustrates James Clifford’s ideas of globalization, in that they are “the multidirectional, unrepresentable sum of material and cultural relationships linking places and people, distant and nearby” and can be important tools for weaving more nuanced and varied “cultural relationships.”⁴¹ These cultural relationships are formed when encountering the untranslatable found within a familiar framework, such as the novel, where space is created for readers to examine their own relationships with the untranslatable and with difference. This offers a means to engage with ideas of breaking the margin-center binary and decentering the historically centered worldview as an act of democracy.⁴²

In conclusion, I argue that following from the “political theory of untranslatability” as put forth in the *Dictionary of Untranslatables*,⁴³ it is also possible to assert that unassimilable and untranslatable forms of expression which can contribute to the world of ideas also include narrative forms and tropes. Untranslatability, as a political concept, can be seen in relation to how acknowledging Indigenous Peoples and their distinct worldviews and knowledge impacts on the Euro-Western-centered historical narrative. On one hand, because of their own particular sovereignty and rights with regard to autonomy and laws, and their relationship with national borders crossing their lands, Indigenous Peoples question the prioritization and legitimacy of the nation-state. Simultaneously, their very presence and survival contradicts the narrative of conquest, and in particular the narrative of the “discovery” of (supposedly uninhabited

³⁹ *Supra* note 9, at 3.

⁴⁰ *Supra* note 1, at Annex.

⁴¹ James Clifford, *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty First Century* (Cambridge, USA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 6.

⁴² See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York, USA: Columbia University Press, 2003); *Supra* note 4.

⁴³ *Supra* note 3, at xv.

or unclaimed) lands by Europeans. The continuous presence, survival, and resistance of Indigenous populations also contradict the narrative that colonization happened in the past and is not part of an ongoing process. The ongoing appropriation of Indigenous lands and the concurrent human rights violations, as well as both acute and institutional racism toward Indigenous communities, are sadly still a contemporary global issue. Their resistance and fight for sovereignty makes Indigenous Peoples' humanity hard to ignore, and in this way, it fights against the tendency to push them into a state of alterity. Jody Byrd writes in *The Transits of Empire* about the ways that Indigenous Peoples are written off as "past tense presences," in order to accomplish the "derealization of the Other."⁴⁴ Through the visibility and presence of Indigenous Peoples, their cultures, and their knowledge, the vulnerability of the narrative of colonization is exposed. Judith Butler asserts that since a hegemonic construction relies on repetition of its own narrative in order to maintain its hegemonic position, it is therefore at risk should its own discursive assertions be challenged, contradicted, or reinterpreted.⁴⁵ As the colonial state relies on the idea of the "Other" to assert its identity, this "Other" becomes a point of vulnerability when it has its own narrative and its own voice and agency.

Language and literature can be useful tools in challenging the centralization of the discourse of the colonial settler state. Telling stories of the lived experiences of Indigenous Peoples, in past and present, not only speaks to the oral traditions of American Indian nations, but honors their survivance as an intrinsic act of resistance. The untranslatable elements of narratives can recognize the fallacy of the narrative in which American Indians are relegated to a distant, and therefore distanced, past.⁴⁶ Leslie Marmon Silko and other Indigenous writers, through the visibility and broad reach of their writing, challenge the ideas of otherness and the colonial narrative, and simultaneously challenge ideas of margin and center. In Leslie Marmon Silko's novels, for example, we see that Indigenous lives, culture, knowledge and worldviews do not exist outside society, but rather exist inside, informing and influencing and, potentially, healing it. Not only do they exist, but they matter, and they bring important knowledge, resistance, connection, and creativity that has the potential to challenge global processes of cultural and discursive homogenization.

⁴⁴ Jody Byrd, *The Transits of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis, USA: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), no pag.

⁴⁵ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York, USA: Routledge, 1993), passim.

⁴⁶ *Supra* note 2, at 142.