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Return and Recovery: The Influence of Place on Blues Murder Ballads and Laguna Ceremony Cycles

Tyler J. Dettloff

Northern Michigan University, tdettlof@nmu.edu

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RETURN AND RECOVERY: THE INFLUENCE OF PLACE ON BLUES MURDER
BALLADS AND LAGUNA CEREMONY CYCLES

By

TYLER DETTLOFF

THESIS

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This thesis by Tyler Dettloff is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis
Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Assistant
Provost of Graduate Education and Research.

Committee Chair: Dr. Amy Hamilton Date

First Reader: Dr. Lesley Larkin Date

Second Reader (if required): Date

Department Head: Dr. Robert Whalen Date

Dr. Brian D. Cherry Date
Assistant Provost of Graduate Education and Research

ABSTRACT

RETURN AND RECOVERY: THE INFLUENCE OF PLACE ON BLUES MURDER BALLADS AND LAGUNA CEREMONY CYCLES

By

Tyler Dettloff

The relationships between place, narrative, memory, and identity are integral in many oral traditions. This project considers place as actively shaping Sterling's identity in Laguna author Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Almanac of the Dead* and R.L. Burnside's rendition of the popular murder ballad "Stack O'Lee and Billy Lyons." Ethical and personal views of land and place offers a method for individual and cultural survivance. Comparing these two separate "return and recovery" narratives offer a clear illustration of how land impacts identity.

Sterling's home in Laguna Pueblo falls victim to the extraction industry and bares a scar that results in Sterling's banishment from Laguna. His time as a gardener allows him to reconnect with land and his interest in the Dillinger Gang history in Tucson, Arizona reconnects him to place-based stories. As a result, upon his return to Laguna he reconnects with the land and views Mt. Taylor as his elders taught him is was named, "Woman Veiled In Rain Clouds."

R.L. Burnside's experiences with murder and death inform this project's reading of his unique first-person perspective in his rendition of the popular murder ballad "Stack

O'Lee and Billy Lyons.” When faced with the racial subjugation upon his return to Senatobia, Mississippi from Chicago, Illinois, just like the ruthless Stack O'Lee, Burnside kills for his land. The tension between humor and violence in his rendition of “Stack O'Lee and Billy Lyons” informs this interpretation of Burnside's ruthless defense of and connection to his sharecrop land.

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DEDICATION

To Delirium's edge, where we bury our dogs and lose our cats, where tamaracks glow and cattails root, where summer finds blueberries and a moon over steel tracks.

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This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines the relationships among place, narrative, and memory in a well-known blues song and a novel by Laguna author, Leslie Marmon Silko. Through attention to cultural context and ecocritical theories, I trace parallels between the “return and recovery” narrative of musician R.L. Burnside and the character of Sterling in *Almanac of the Dead*. Burnside and Sterling experienced different types of geographical displacement from their home places. Each chapter will provide cultural context because, as I have chosen to focus on both a literary character and a historical figure, it is important to distinguish between the two as being from different cultures. This project draws upon eco-critical approaches and Native American survivance theory to analyze the “return and recovery” narratives of Sterling and Burnside.

R.L. Burnside, a blues musician from Senatobia, Mississippi, gained his fame later in life with Fat Possum Records in the 1990s, but was an integral part of North Mississippi Hill Blues music through the second half of the twentieth century. This project demonstrates the importance of Burnside’s personal narrative when considering the uniqueness of his rendition of the popular murder ballad “Stack O’Lee and Billy Lyons”.

The other individual which this project focuses on is Sterling the gardener, perhaps the only redeemable character from Leslie Marmon Silko’s novel *Almanac of the Dead*. Sterling is from the Laguna Pueblo in New Mexico, sharing a home place with the author. Upon Sterling’s return to Laguna he is able to identify a sacred mountain as

Woman Veiled in Rain Clouds rather than Mt. Taylor, and distinction indicative to his own identity as a Laguna man.

This project views the land and place as having an active role in shaping narrative, as interacting with human characters to shape story expression. Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism simply as, “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty xviii). In order to ground my ecocritical approach, I will explore the multiple views a single character has of his environment--Sterling’s views of Laguna Pueblo and Burnside’s views of Senatobia, Mississippi--views which mature into conscious ecological connection between person and place bonded by story.

For Silko, contemporary stories like gossip function similarly to what Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna/Lakota/Lebanese) defines as “ceremonial,” acts that “fuse the individual with his or her fellows...and this larger communal group with the worlds beyond this one...This person sheds the isolated, individual personality and is restored to conscious harmony with the universe” (Allen 1996 249). Ceremonial oral traditions depend on this formula of individual interpellation for individuals to recognize their roles within the grander oral tradition. But, as Silko states in her essay “Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective,” “our [Pueblo] stories are so much a part of these [ancestral lands] that it is almost impossible for future generations to lose them--there is a story connected with every place, every object in the landscape” (Silko 1996 58). Place and land are central figures not only in Silko’s novel *Almanac of the Dead* but in other oral traditions as well.

Silko's commentary in a 1978 interview about how rumors function in Laguna informed my reading of *Almanac*. Silko relates, "When I talk about the oral tradition or about the way the people at Laguna take delight in relating stories of incidents that happened either recently or in the past, people say, 'Well, that's gossip'" (*Running on the Edge of the Rainbow*). She connects thematic elements of place and incidence within rumors, close readings which are "very important to understand[ing] the function that this kind of telling and retelling of incidents has" because "whenever some things like that are related, at the same time, all other kinds of stories are remembered and told" (*Running on the Edge of the Rainbow*). Silko establishes that contemporary experiences can resemble oral tradition in Laguna world view, a retelling of traditional stories in contemporary context.

The connections between place and story are paramount to cultural survivance, and oral tradition can be a vector for cultural survivance, a malleable term coined by Anishinaabe critic and author Gerald Vizenor. Vizenor writes in *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence* that, "Survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, detractions, obtrusions, the unbearable sentiments of tragedy, and the legacy of victimry. Survivance is the heritable right of succession or reversion of an estate..." (Vizenor). Interpreting "reversion of an estate" as return of place, I plan to apply survivance as a method of reconnecting place to story, person to story, person to place, and other iterations of this triad relationship. Survivance stories contain techniques for continuance in the face of systematic subjectifications to trauma and connect personal tragedy to communal continuance, cultural adaptations, and reaffirmation of internal and universal balance. In

short, survivance stories assist individuals in ceremonial recovery of connection to place, completing cyclical healing.

Since the oral tradition depends on individuals to be interpolated into story, spiritual intervention ensures continuation of story. In order to keep the story living, spiritual acts nudge characters to actively preserve the ancient almanac, a physical symbol for oral tradition in *Almanac of the Dead*. The ancient almanac itself is written and rewritten many times, transcribed and re-articulated.

R.L. Burnside is a North Mississippi Blues musician who is best known for his blues revival releases through Fat Possum Records in the 1990s. Fat Possum Records is an independent record label based in Oxford, Mississippi that initially recorded previously unsung Mississippi blues artists such as R.L. Burnside, Junior Kimbrough, T-Model Ford. Burnside's releases featured his hill country blues songs which the label frequently pumped up with sampled drum beats and remixing, thus revitalizing his blues music for a younger audience.

R.L. Burnside recorded with other labels as well and released multiple raw live recordings. One song in particular that reflects Burnside's unique explicit lyricism and the repetition in groove-based North Mississippi Hill Blues is his version of "Stack O'Lee and Billy Lyons". Burnside released two recorded versions of this song. One version titled "Staggolee (Not Suitable for Airplay)" is included on *Well...Well...Well* released through MC Records (MC0042) as a collection of Burnside songs and interviews recorded between 1986 and 1993. The other version titled "Stack O'Lee and Billy Lyons" is featured on the live split album *Going Down South*--also featuring Ranie Burnette and

Johnny Woods--released by Swingmaster (2203). Burnside is fairly consistent in his performance of the Stack O'Lee song in these two versions. But the Stack O'Lee story-song has a long history as one of the most performed and recorded murder ballads. Burnside shot and killed a man, much like the character of Stack O'Lee does, in his rendition of the murder ballad. Not only does Burnside's rendition of the song challenge the authoritative third-person narrations of the story, but Burnside's act of murder shows how characters of survivance materialize as acts of survivance.

This project reassesses land as a central figure in literature that shapes identity and promotes cultural survivance. These are only two examples of the "return and recovery" narrative that rely on land for story and memory to converge and resolve identity crises. I argue that ecocritical perspectives and consideration of cultural survivance theories reveals the careful precision in Silko's layered novel *Almanac of the Dead* and the nuanced cultural heroism present when R.L. Burnside shot and killed a man over his land.

CHAPTER ONE: STERLING THE GARDENER FINDS WOMAN VEILED IN RAIN CLOUDS

My analysis of Sterling in *Almanac of the Dead* assumes that the landscape imagery in contemporary stories that surround Sterling's exile from his tribal lands must resemble traditional stories. *Almanac* is a complex novel that includes a multitude of main characters from globally diverse locations whose conflicting traumas are centered on the singular location of Tucson, Arizona, but this project will focus on the character of Sterling and the place of Laguna. Sterling's unique position between Laguna and Tucson provides an example of how Silko uses place and land as a character that impacts identity through story.

Sterling is from the Laguna Pueblo and finds himself a delegate between Laguna and the rest of the world. He leaves Laguna to work on the railroad in California and when he returns he finds a Uranium Mine in operation near Laguna. Sterling is appointed by the tribal council to a position as overseer of a visiting Hollywood film crew. Sterling is to enforce restrictions on what sacred spaces are not to be filmed. The tribal council sees his experience outside of Laguna as making him a suitable candidate to communicate between the cultures. When the Hollywood film crew finds and films a sacred Giant Stone Snake, Sterling is exiled from Laguna for failing his task. He finds employment as a gardener outside of Tucson, Arizona at Lecha's ranch, a woman who attempts to transcribe the ancient almanac, a text that symbolizes oral tradition, contains histories and prophecies of Pueblo peoples.

Sterling's interaction with the earth as a gardener at Lecha's ranch is vividly detailed and foreshadows his reconnection with land and place. When he is working, "He could see the desert dip and roll, a jade-green sea to the horizon and jagged, blue mountain peaks like islands across the valley" (Silko *Almanac* 36). The colors are cool shades of blue, soothing in the desert heat. Island imagery evokes a quenching satisfaction in the dry heat of the summer. These juxtapositions in description and feeling convey a heightened sense of awareness in Sterling. Even more powerful is his amazement with ecology and the interactions between weather and plants: "When he worked in the yard with his rake, he was amazed at the lichens and mosses that sprang up on northern exposures after the least rain shower" (Silko *Almanac* 36). This passage connects Sterling's individuality, his labor, to plant life and precipitation, both so precious in the desert climate. Additionally, Sterling is connected to the directions, as he relates that North is the direction of shade and, thus, moisture and life. These descriptions of the landscape surrounding him and the plant beings that he interacts with bear a striking resemblance to traditionally oral stories included in this novel, as well as the description of his return to Laguna.

Before his gardening, Sterling has little conscience connection to the land in Laguna, only by consequence where he failed to protect sacred space from outsiders, so his affiliation with land is destructive. Sterling is appointed to keep a Hollywood film crew "under control" because the Tribal Council trusts Sterling and rely on his "years of living with white people in California" as qualification to perhaps communicate between the two cultures (Silko *Almanac* 35). While Sterling worked on the railroad in Barstow,

California, uranium was discovered near the Paguate Village. Soon enough, an unfortunately familiar narrative ensues: company opens a mine on Pueblo land, the elders object, the Federal Government encourages the mining for uranium needed for Cold War arms race, and the Tribal Council “goes along with the mine because the government gave them no choice, and the mine gave them jobs” (Silko *Almanac* 34). This narrative is recognizable in modern American culture. This tragic story is within popular oral tradition. Ironically and tragically, Hollywood films like *Avatar*, *FernGully*, and *Dances With Wolves* exploit this narrative. But Silko focuses this narrative on landscape and the single redeemable character in her novel:

The mine had destroyed Sterling’s life without Sterling’s ever setting foot near the acres of ruined earth at the open pit. If there hadn’t been the mine, the giant stone snake would not have appeared, and the Hollywood film crew would never have seen it or filmed it (Silko *Almanac* 35)

Silko clearly relates the profound effect that alterations to the landscape can inflict upon the lives of those who are connected with the original landscape. Silko also sets up a troublesome relationship between Sterling and Laguna land. Sterling’s detachment from protecting the land and giant stone snake gets him removed from Laguna, which can only frustrate Sterling and his relationship to Laguna.

Before analyzing Sterling’s return to Laguna, it is important to emphasize the circular structure which drives the stories in *Almanac*, because Sterling’s own banishment narrative ends up being added to the ancient almanac. The ancient almanac contains histories and prophecies and serves as a symbol for oral tradition. Four women attempt to

preserve the ancient almanac in Silko's *The Almanac of the Dead*--the Eldest Girl, Yoeme, Lecha, and Seese--through multiple generations. These four women ultimately contribute original material to the almanac, become interpolated into the story as Thought-Woman, Ts'its'tsi'nako, the spider, and continue the tradition of preserving the text.

This cycle of textual preservation rooted in place symbolizes the spherical form of oral traditions, what Paula Gunn Allen describes as,

the American Indian...view [of] space as spherical and time as cyclical...the circular concept requires all 'points' that make up the sphere of being to have a significant identity and function, while the linear [non-Indian] model assumes that some 'points' are more significant than others. (Allen 1996 246)

Allen expresses an American Indian view of community where survival is a group effort rather than survival for the privileged. This communal survival ideology challenges western colonial views of dominant narratives, allowing the community to continually adapt for the survival of the whole rather than the preservation of the individual. Circular concept of time and space allows for traditions to be updated to fit the needs of the present; such an example would be the ancient almanac which is continually edited and never fully transcribed. Previously mentioned significant characters are "points" in the circle who update the text. When one character hands off the duty of transcribing the ancient almanac, this completes a revolution in circular time.

While *The Almanac of the Dead* has received criticism as being "a novel of bewilderment" and some even "reject it outright for the mysterious complexity of its

darkness¹,” these reactions are expected when one reads the story as a fixed, linear narrative. Silko resists narrative linearity by representing characters as points that function within a spherical story framework, living stories in space and time. The patterns are too overwhelming to make linear sense of, but the patterns repeat in spherical cycles.

The women who participate in the continuation of the story, perform the story, and ultimately create the story--Yoeme, Lecha, and Seese--function as Thought-Woman, Ts’its’tsi’nako, the spider, the sacred figure in Laguna life who creates the story of the world through thought. Returning to the Thought-Woman poem that appears in multiple Silko works² will inform this pre-emptive contextualization of how *The Almanac of the Dead* functions as an oral text:

Ts’its’tsi’nako, Thought-Woman,
is sitting in her room
and whatever she thinks about
appears.

She thought of her sisters,
Nau’ts’ity’i and I’tets’ity’i,
and together they created the Universe
this world
and the four worlds below.

Thought-Woman, the spider,
named things and
as she named them
they appeared.

She is sitting in her room
thinking of a story now

¹ David Moore offers these reader response criticisms in “The Ground of Ethics: Arrowboy’s Ecologic in *Almanac*” (Tillet 164).

² The “Thought-Woman poem” appears in Silko’s novel *Ceremony* (pg. 2) and essay “Fifth World: the Return of Ma ah shra true ee, the Giant Serpent” from *Yellow Woman and the Beauty of the Spirit* (pgs. 125-6).

I'm telling you the story
she is thinking.

The idea in this poem is that thinking creates reality. More accurately, thinking elicits language and “naming” which then creates reality. In the final stanza of the poem, the speaker uses language to create reality just as the creator Ts'its'tsi'nako and her sisters do. There are multiple examples Thought-Woman manifestations in *Almanac* that help frame Sterling's disconnection and reconnection with landscape.

The “Journey of the Ancient Almanac” chapter in *Almanac* contains the earliest representation of Thought-Woman. In order to resist linear narrative, Silko begins by framing the ancient almanac story. Lecha reflects on how little Yoeme had relayed to her about the old notebooks. But Lecha does remember “the material transcribed into the notebooks had been on thin sheet of membrane [...] Yoeme had told [Lecha and Zeta] the skins had been stretched and pressed out of horse stomachs” (246). Not only is the language of the ancient almanac different from the current “old notebooks” Lecha possesses, but the material on which the original message was inscribed is also different. This difference creates a rift in the versions, creates a separate story than was originally told and foretold. This establishes a pattern for written story adaptation, a metaphor for adaptations in the oral tradition.

Lecha reflects on Yoeme's telling of the story of the horse-gut ancient almanac. A tribal band who “carried the manuscript” traveled North as fugitives, on the run from the “Butcher” (246). The fugitive band knows they have little chance of survival and debate whether to let the “almanac die with them,” effectively ending their people; an argument is made that, “since their kind would no longer be...the manuscript should rightly die with

them” (246). This connection between story and identity demonstrates understanding of survival. The manuscript--more accurately, the story on the manuscript--is dependent on the survival of people who identify as this tribe. The story depends on the people for its survival. This dependence is reciprocated in the fugitive tribe’s decision to continue their story.

This early oral account sets up the first manifestation of Thought-Woman: family tragedy sends the individual into movement toward asylum. The fugitive tribe sends four children North with the manuscript in hopes of finding a tribe that will accept them. “[T]hree young girls and a small boy” traveled “with pages of the almanac sewn into their ragged garments” in search of refuge (246). The goal in their journey was not to preserve the text, but to survive as a people: “The people knew if even a part on their almanac survived, they as a people would return someday” (246). I differentiate preserve and survive here to demonstrate the living quality inherent to the almanac stories and, thus, the oral tradition. As opposed to an object to be preserved for later reflection, the stories will re-populate a people and create life. In other words, the children are told that the almanac carried “all of the days of their people. These days and years were all alive, and all these days would return again” (247). Furthermore, Lecha remembers Yoeme relating that, ““The story of their journey had somehow been included in these notebooks,”” the notebooks which were transcribed from the horse-gut pages of the ancient almanac into Yoeme’s old notebooks. This is the second manifestation of Thought-Woman: the promise of foretold destiny or prophetic fulfillment.

Once the children reach “the village known as ‘The Mouth,’” they encounter the earliest character representation of Thought-Woman, depicted as a spider. Silko depicts the woman as “hunchbacked,” “like a spider,” “singing,” “smiling,” and speaking in a “language [the children] had never heard” (248). The old woman feeds the children stew made from “bulbs and roots the woman had dug along the dry riverbed...” (248). But the stew would not be substantive for the children. The eldest girl then “slipped away,” “unknotted the threads closing the hidden pocket,” and “although she could no more read the writing than she could understand the language of the hunchbacked woman,” she secretly sacrifices the page for survival of the group: “sure the other three were sleeping...she dropped a page of the manuscript into the simmering vegetable stew” (249). The horse-stomach page helps the children and the old woman survive: “They all began to gain strength from just one pot of stew” (249). This Thought-Woman manifestation is an individual altering the unity of the almanac for the benefit of community or family.

The other children find out that the eldest girl sacrificed a page of their horse-gut almanac and are upset, but where written tradition fails in material temporality, oral tradition succeeds in the strength of community memory. The eldest girl, who functions as the next Thought-Woman, bargains with the others:

“I remember what was on the page we ate. I know that part of the almanac--I have heard the stories of those days told many times. Now I am going to tell you three. So if something happens to me, the three of you will know how that part of the story goes” (250)

They agree that “every time a page had been memorized, they could eat it” (250). Here, the story gains the potential to take on multiple versions, for all of the utterances of the story told to them by the eldest girl will be different. This Thought-Woman manifestation the function of the young Thought-Woman becomes orator, or someone who retells the stories within the almanac rather than preserver of the textual documentation.

This version of the journey of the ancient almanac itself is orated, told to Lecha and Zeta by Yoeme, and, while not in direct dialogue, is an authoritative origin story of the ancient almanac. Yoeme pauses in her telling of the story and repeats the importance of preserving the sacred stories:

You see, it had been the almanac that had saved them. The first night, if the eldest had not sacrificed a page from the book, that crippled woman would have murdered them all right then... That woman had been left behind by the others. The reign of the Death-Eye Dog is marked by people like her... the possibility of becoming like her trails each one of us. (253)

Yoeme’s warning sheds light on the importance of sacrificing sections of the written story and letting them exist in the oral version. This remarkable stability that oral tradition has in presenting patterns for audience identification far surpasses written tradition.

The journey of the ancient almanac story offers a condensed version of how Yoeme, Lecha, and Seese find themselves functioning in relation to the almanac text. Silko writes in “Notes on *Almanac of the Dead*” that she could not write the novel in a linear “single line moving from point A to point B to point C,” that she “knew that [she] wanted to shape time...to use narrative to shift the reader’s experience of time and the

meaning of history as stories that mark certain points in time,” and she accomplishes this liminality of time through “all sorts of myths from the Americas, including modern myths” (140). Silko allows “modern myths” to be place-based-rumors in *Almanac*, an allowance which elevates the individual to function as sacred and allows a space for rumors to function as ceremonial literature. Yoeme, Lecha, and Seese represent significant points³ along the spherical map and circular time-line. The appearance of Thought-Woman manifestations in the lives of Yoeme, Lecha, and Seese reinforce how *Almanac of the Dead* functions as a living text, as continuation of oral tradition, and establishes the interconnectivity of story and place that Sterling navigates in the novel. While it is important to acknowledge that transcription of an oral story does effect the orality of the story by suspending the words in written text, there is merit in treating the ancient almanac in *The Almanac of the Dead* as representative of oral text. N. Scott Momaday defines and contemplates the significance of a Sioux song being “transcribed” in *The Man Made of Words*:

It was not composed in writing, but it is preserved on the printed page, it exists now in written form. What was lost or gained in the process of translation and transcription? This we cannot know, but it is perhaps enough to know that the song, as we have it, is alive and powerful and beautiful... (20)

There is contention between Silko and Momaday in regard to oral tradition transcription; Momaday values the text-bound preservation of oral tradition and Silko denies the ancient almanac (metaphor for oral tradition in *Almanac*) from ever being fully

³ Characters as points here is a reference to Allen’s description of space as sphere and time as cycle, a “circular concept [which] requires all ‘points’ that make up the sphere of being to have a significant identity and function...” (Allen 1996 246).

transcribed. But Momaday also writes of the “formulaic context...where the words are precisely fitted into the context of religious ceremony, the oral tradition achieves a remarkable stability, an authority not unlike that of Scripture” (17). Taken together, these two Native American authors’ views on oral tradition are unfixed and stabile.

The paring of *stabile* and *unfixed* is as uncomfortable in Western ideology as the pairing of *idle* and *gossip* is in Laguna ideology. Silko has stated that, “oftentimes the two words are linked: idle gossip. There's nothing about this at all that's idle. It's a very intense sort of thing, this recalling” (*Running on the Edge of the Rainbow*). Laguna oral tradition is stabile in the sense that the story arc and skeleton are consistent, the stories and gossip have intensity in the novel that provides characters with drive and purpose. In Laguna worldview within *Almanac of the Dead*, these stories are unfixed because characters wrapped in gossip are completely separate from characters in traditional stories, but happen to experience traditional narratives in contemporary circumstances.

Sterling’s narrative of banishment and his witnessing of land destruction is retold by Seese and Lecha and resembles the story of Lecha and Zeta’s father’s own experience with mining. Lecha and Zeta’s father is a geologist who surveyed areas for profitable minerals. More specifically, he “came to Potam to survey the ore formations and new [mine] shafts” (120). The geologist released a report confirming the existence of ore-bearing areas which brought mining to the area. But there was no ore-bearing rock, his projections were wrong, and the miners found nothing. Even when, “other geologists had been called to evaluate his projections and the samples and assay results, they could find no fault with his work” (120). The geologists call it a scientific anomaly, but rumors

circulate about alternative reasons for the ore's disappearance. This story land disruption having an impact the geologist is contained in the almanac, just as Sterling's banishment story is in the almanac. The consequences of this geological anomaly are strikingly similar to the giant stone snake that the Hollywood film crew find. The land in Laguna plays an active role and requires protection; without protection, the land causes harm to negligent caretakers through story and community action. This story repetition and circular time becomes clear with an ecocritical view engages land as central figure in the story.

Yoeme argues that Mother Earth had been violated, that the place which is deeply connected to stories has been altered and mined. She becomes "contemptuous of the innuendos about [her] witchcraft" and argues that, "[the geologist's] ailment had been common among those who had gone into caverns...the condition had also been seen in persons who had been revived from drowning in a lake or spring with an entrance to the four worlds below this world" (121). The geologist suffered from altering the landscape which is closely tied to the stories that Yoeme preserves. As a result, the Zeta and Lecha experience a broken family upbringing with "their father, a detached white man who smiled and spoke and who was a dead man already" (121). This scene from *Almanac* shows how Yoeme fulfills what I have deemed the third manifestation of Thought-Woman, frustration with periphery alteration of the almanac's integrity. Since the stories in the almanac are so closely tied to land, alteration of land upsets Yoeme. Similarly, later in the novel, Lecha connects Sterling's encounter with the giant stone snake to the prophetic end times marked by The Destroyers killing the earth (Silko *Almanac* 702). The

similarity between Yoeme and Lecha's arguments are a reminder of how rumors can be altered repetitions of oral traditions stories. Ultimately, this rumor becomes interpolated into the oral tradition--the *Almanac*--as a contemporary example of Thought-Woman becoming frustrated with alteration to story. Although, it seems that both alteration the story (or landscape) and Thought-Woman's frustration are both necessary. That is, this is a cyclical and unavoidable story instead of a story that teaches a lesson of behavior to avoid.

Yoeme's recognition of place-based rumors as oral tradition and her separation of the almanac's unity resembles attributes of the eldest girl in the journey of the ancient almanac story. Silko weaves Yoeme's narrative into the beginning of *Almanac* before revealing the journey of the ancient almanac in order to establish the eldest character to function as Thought-Woman. After all, Yoeme is the character who tells Lecha the story of the ancient almanac's journey (246).

Lecha is a central character in *Almanac* and has psychic powers to locate the dead. Lecha even sees the future and hears the dead. She hears her grandma, Yoeme, say, "Where do you suppose you got that ability, that gift?" and the narrator continues, "Because Yoeme must have known all along that Lecha would be the one" (138). The narrator relates that, "Much of Lecha's life had been spent listening to people when she already knew the story they were telling, and more; more than she might ever reveal" (160). Lecha's psychic ability to locate the dead puts her in the position of listening to stories she already knows, an inversion of the Ts'its'tsi'nako, Thought-Woman, poem's line "She is sitting in her room / thinking of a story now / I'm telling you

the story” (Silko, 1986, 2). From Lecha’s perspective as Thought-Woman, her thoughts and the stories being told to her are simultaneous stories. This ability allows Lecha to fulfill the promise of destiny, what I have located as the second manifestation of Thought-Woman.

Prompted by the molestation of sacred land, Lecha relies on a rumor she’s heard as a means to update the story that relates consequences of violating Mother Earth. Because “The United States government intended to keep all the stolen land,” Lecha reasons that “The Destroyers were killing the earth” (702). The narrator relates that this strenuous time “arrived more quickly than any of the people had dreamed, and yet, all the forces had begun to converge” (702). Immediately after, Lecha relates a story about the consequences of violating Mother Earth. Lecha recalls “a strange story from the gardener, Sterling” (702). By evoking Sterling’s story, Lecha relies on cyclical understanding of time as a means of expression. The rumors of Sterling’s encounter with the giant stone serpent marinate in Lecha’s mind and emerge as part of oral tradition, Sterling becomes included in the almanac of the dead. It is as this intersection of story, identity, and place that Sterling begins to exist within the almanac which validates his identity as “‘points’ that make up the sphere of being to have a significant identity and function” (Allen 1996 246). The inclusion of this story renunciation supports the claim that *Almanac* functions as a living text, as an oral tradition text.

Sterling ends up in Tucson, Arizona after his banishment which allows him to experience a place-based story. The narrator remarks that “Downtown Tucson looked pretty much like downtown Albuquerque before they had ‘urban-renewed’ it...” which

shows yet another shift in landscape identity (Silko *Almanac* 28). Although, Sterling is able to identify with the place of Tucson because of the crime stories he reads in his many magazine subscriptions that imbibe place with story. He walks to the “Congress Hotel...the place John Dillinger’s gang had made their worst mistake” (Silko *Almanac* 28). With this connection between story and place, Sterling starts to “feel better” because, “Tucson was going to be an interesting place. It had history. Where else could he have a cold beer at the same place Dillinger and his gang had been drinking beer in 1934?” (Silko *Almanac* 28-9). Sterling is able to exist in that “ceremonial space” which connects place, oral tradition, and the individual at the Congress Hotel in Tucson.

Later in the novel, Sterling and his co-worker Seese are outside of The Congress hotel and Sterling tells Seese the Dillinger Gang story and engages in place-based oral tradition. Seese “park[s] across the street so she could look and concentrate on the old building while Sterling talked” (Silko *Almanac* 76). This shows a clear connection between place and story, place and retelling, and place and listening. Silko stresses this intimate relationship between place and story in this scene. She writes, “It was easy to imagine all the things happening when you were parked right there on the actual site. For a moment [Sterling] considered simply reading a paragraph or two out of his magazine. But Sterling had visualized it so many times in the years since he had first read the article that he thought he would just tell Seese just the way he pictured the demise of the Dillinger gang” (Silko *Almanac* 76). Sterling’s connection to this story is so strong that he abandons the textual version and opts to orate his own version of the story. It is implied here that if Sterling and Seese were not in front of the Congress Hotel, he might

have simply read from his magazine. But it is the connection between place, individual, and story that allows Sterling to orate this story. Sterling's abandonment of the written page in favor of his own orated version echoes the scene in the journey of the ancient almanac story where the children eat the horse-gut pages after they have committed the stories on those pages to memory.

To interpret this scene as a story leaving text and entering oral tradition might be problematic for many reasons, but Silko allows Sterling to voice his own version of a story with connection to place for the first time in this scene. This is a significant event because Sterling controls the narrative. He even "paused for emphasis and to look again at the three stories of windows..." (Silko *Almanac* 76). In the story of his banishment from Laguna, the narrative controls him.

It is interesting to note here that Sterling gains employment as a gardener and as a gardener he is also able to control and interact with the landscape of the small garden space which he tends. Sterling is "still new to this place"--Lecha's Ranch outside of Tucson where he is employed--and "here the earth herself was almost a stranger" (Silko *Almanac* 36). It is the interaction between landscape and story which allows Sterling to approach a "ceremonial space," which, as Robin Wall Kimmerer (Citizen Potawatomi) points out in her essay "An Offering," "marries the mundane to the sacred" (Kimmerer). Sterling's work is mundane, but he experiences the grandeur of the landscape and vegetation as sacred. Sterling pauses in his work and "for a moment the expanse of the desert sky was motionless. No Hawks circled. The coyotes were silent...Sterling had a

great urge to stretch out on the chaise lounge by the pool” (Silko *Almanac* 36). This moment is very spiritual for Sterling. He is able to acknowledge his place in the universe.

Silko’s text *Almanac of the Dead* is a living text that circulates contemporary stories that make their way into the ancient almanac, keep the oral tradition alive. Perhaps the Ts’its’tsi’nako, Thought-Woman, and her sisters, Nau’ts’ity’i and I’tcts’ity’i from Silko’s poem, take shape as Yoeme, Lecha, and Seese. Silko shows how the role of creator in stories is never singular, time is not linear, and space is not a plane. Silko also demonstrates how oral traditions are spiritual and human, circular and place-based, adaptive and nuanced. These three women only represent a small fraction of the characters in *Almanac*. Sterling, and perhaps his Laguna relatives, are unable to experience this “ceremonial space” in Paguate Village because the mining has altered the landscape and, thus, the traditional stories struggle exist without the reliable control of static landscape. Mining alters the landscape and as a result, the contemporary gossip stories do not resemble traditional stories. Land is a key character in traditional stories, a character that endures irreparable injury and becomes unrecognizable. There is slim chance for Sterling to have a “ceremonial connection” with his home landscape. One might ask if he can recognize his tragedy in traditional stories if the landscapes are changing. Additionally, one might ask if the rumors about Sterling’s exile get him banished because they have no familiar landmarks to land upon, no historical space to connect contemporary experience to traditional story.

One aspect of Sterling’s banishment that interrupts him from recognizing his position within traditional story is land alteration. In the final chapter of *Almanac*,

“Home,” Sterling returns to his home lands and engages with the environment in a way he hadn’t before. His time as a gardener at Lecha’s ranch outside of Tucson allows Sterling to regain an environmental perspective. Additionally, his engagement with place and the Dillinger gang story at the Congress Hotel allows his to connect story to place very strongly. Sterling has a strong reaction when he recognizes the landscapes of his homelands, a relationship rekindled by his experience as a gardener and experiencing place-based stories. The narrator relates that,

when [he] caught a glimpse of the distant blue peaks of Mt. Taylor, his throat tightened and tears ran down his cheeks. Woman Veiled in Rain Clouds was what the old people had called the mountain. Sterling was home. (Silko *Almanac* 756)

The sight of Mt. Taylor, a sacred location, triggers the traditionally orated name of the mountain for Sterling. He re-enters his homeland as a ceremonial space by connecting place (Mt. Taylor), story (Woman Veiled in Rain Clouds), and self (Home).

Sterling moves through the Laguna landscape in this chapter and ultimately engages with the landscape as active participant in his own narrative. The narrator supplies the most vivid details of Laguna in the entire novel: “Little sand hills across the little valley to the sandstone cliffs where the family sheep camp was” (Silko *Almanac* 757). These details show that Sterling does in fact have the capability to be healed spiritually, to exist in a ceremonial home space, despite the injuries of the mine upon the land and his exile from that land.

Furthermore, Sterling’s engagement with his homeland’s environment allows him the confidence to shed his the magazine stories that previously formed his identity. The

narrator relates, “He didn’t have the heart to look at his magazines anymore...the magazines referred to a world Sterling had left forever, a world that was gone, that safe old world that had never really existed except on the pages of *Reader’s Digest*...” (Silko *Almanac* 757). While Silko tells us that the stories in the magazines are phony, she shows through Sterling how they can help reestablish an individual’s connection to place and story. Sterling continues to engage with the land and the reader learns, “he had never spent so much time before alone with the earth; he sat below the red sandstone cliffs and watched the high, thin clouds” (Silko *Almanac* 757). Sterling’s newly established relationship with his homeland is strengthened upon his return, but challenged when he revisits the site of the giant stone snake that resulted in his banishment.

His engagement with place prompts a deep connection and he imagines his place within this story. Sterling continues to walk through the landscape of “sand hills,” “valleys,” and “sandstone cliffs,” after he bathes in “the shallow creek the Laguna people call ‘the river’” and “Sterling felt stronger as he walked along. The wild purple asters were blooming...he heard the field larks call” (Silko *Almanac* 758). But his connection with the land lies only in the natural formations and the healthy ecology which the mine has interrupted, thus, Sterling does not feel connection with the mined area of Laguna land. Silko narrates the history and prophecy that the mine interrupts for Silko:

As long as Sterling did not face the mine, he could look out across the grassy valley at the sandstone mesas and imagine the land a thousand years ago...Lecha had talked about the Lakota prophecy...that as a matter of fact, the buffalo were returning to the Great Plains... (Silko *Almanac* 758)

He is able to have faith in prophecy as long as he “did not face the mine.” Sterling’s positioning in this scene implies that the mine marks the land so profoundly that it distorts Sterling’s faith in prophecy. As he approaches the giant stone snake, Sterling tries to remember the traditional stories he had been told. This signifies redemption in survival of oral tradition. By narrating that “Sterling tried to remember more of the stories the old people used to tell; he wished he had listened more closely,” Silko offers her readers a lesson on the importance of listening to both story and place. Sterling remembers the old stories of colonialism from the South and connects the mine’s damages to the earth: “Here was the new work of the Destroyers; here was destruction and poison” (Silko *Almanac* 760). When he makes this connection, he is able to analyze the intersection between contemporary story and traditional story to better understand about why the giant stone snake had reappeared. Rumors about the snake’s significance varied from a symbol that “the mine had won” to a sign “pointing to the next mesa the mine would devour” which echoed the “gossip and speculation about what had happened to Sterling in Tucson” (Silko *Almanac* 762). Rumors haunt him and seem to individualize him rather than help him recognize his situation as part of a story cycle in the Laguna oral tradition. But Sterling’s ability to engage with the landscape of his homeland and traditional Laguna stories give him a confident perspective on the purpose of the giant stone snake’s reappearance: “Sterling didn’t care about the rumors and gossip because Sterling knew why the giant stone snake had returned now...” (Silko *Almanac* 763). Silko makes a profound statement on environmental ethics that resonates through perhaps the only redeemable character in *Almanac of the Dead*. Sterling is an “innocent” bystander to the

effects of mining, lost personal connections with the earth, and forgetting oral traditions as ceremonial and communal.

When Sterling is able to identify the sight of that sacred mountain as Woman Veiled In Rain Clouds instead of Mt. Taylor, he regains validation of his Laguna identity. Silko delays Sterling's identity recovery until his return and until his interpolation into the almanac of the dead. Silko's careful and purposeful placement of Sterling's recovery upon his return to Laguna illustrates the interconnectivity between place and story. Additionally, this ecocritical reading of Sterling's return shows how the name of the mountain "Mt. Taylor" disconnects (or replaces) story from place and identity from both story and place, whereas the name of the sacred mountain Woman Veiled In Rain Clouds can be a method of cultural survivance. This sacred landscape plays an intricate role in Sterling's role as community member, as contributor to the stories in the almanac of the dead.

Despite the reviews of *Almanac* as offering only darkness and no hope, I propose that Sterling's return to home as ceremonial space is a hopeful ending. The healing ceremonial cycle--alignment of individual, story, and place--that assists in Sterling's recovery upon his return to home is recognizable as a narrative trope when land and place are interpreted as active instead of passive background. The actions that the land takes upon individuals who neglect protection have serious consequences, irreparable in the case of the Geologist. Sterling provides an example of an ecologically ethical relationship between individual and land that challenges notions of profit-centered land usage

(extraction industry) and, instead, prompts consideration of land as having an active role in both traditional and contemporary oral stories.

CHAPTER TWO: WHY R.L. BURNSIDE “SHOT HIM IN THE HEAD”

Survivance thrives in Blues music and stories, traditionally orated/sung stories. The power of blues music to heal is spiritual and even, according to bluesman Memphis Slim, as Willie Dixon says, “Some people think they’ve got religion, they’ve got the blues” (Slim). Additionally, blues music is deeply rooted in American slavery, as is the landscape of the American South. As blues author Giles Oakley states, “Slaves not only created the wealth of the South, but also the landscape. Their labor was used to build houses, docks, bridges, roads, and later the railroads” (Oakley 11). In addition to constructing the landscape, Oakley cites Frederick Douglas’ remarks of the Black songs that interacted with the landscape and descriptions of “how the slaves on his old plantation would ‘make the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wild notes. These were not always merry because they were wild. On the contrary, they were mostly of a plaintive cast, and told a tale of grief and sorrow’” (Oakley 17). One depiction of this personal-story-place connection is evident in R.L. Burnside’s life story and his unique first-person rendition of “Stack O’Lee and Billy Lyons”.

Origins of the popular murder ballad and the folk hero Stack O’Lee are embedded in American History and illustrate the power of characterization and tension in storytelling. St. Louis, Missouri December 24, 1895. *The St. Louis Globe-Democrat* newspaper reported that

Williams Lyons, 25, a levee hand, was shot in the abdomen...in the saloon of Bill Curtis...by Lee Sheldon. Sheldon withdrew his revolver and shot Lyons in the abdomen. When his victim fell to the floor Sheldon took his hat from the hat of the wounded man and coolly walked away. Lee Sheldon is also known as ‘Stag’ Lee” (Rainey).

The 1895 shooting turned into murder when Lyons died shortly after from the gun shot wound. “Stag” Lee Sheldon was tried and convicted of murder in 1897 and sentenced to 25 years in federal penitentiary. Shortly after receiving official pardon and release from prison in 1909, he returned to prison in 1911 for assault and robbery. In short, “Stag” Lee Sheldon was a bad man, but celebrated as a folk hero and survivor in the racially charged Jim Crow south.

Sheldon’s murder of Lyons quickly gained traction in oral tradition as story-song. Common to most recordings--of which there are over 400--is the third-person narration of the story. The singer is frequently a witness to the murder event, keeping a safe distance as observer. Many versions of the song resemble Mississippi John Hurt’s 1928 version which includes the iconic Stetson hat and the chorus “that bad man, oh cruel Stack O’Lee.” This narrative distance allows storytellers to impart some sort of moral to the story and draw upon Stack O’Lee as an example of “bad.” As this song is part of the oral tradition of blues music, shared orally, the details vary greatly from each storyteller/singer. Although, the third-person narration is consistent and seems to be a reliable and somewhat essential in orating Stack O’Lee’s story, except for R.L. Burnside.

In both of Burnside's recorded versions of "Stack O'Lee" he tells the story from the perspective of Stack O'Lee. This shift in perspective is significant not only because it diverges from the oral tradition of third-person narration, but also because of Burnside's own complex experiences with murder. Burnside's explicit language, violent descriptions, and jovial laughter suggests a sympathetic and even celebratory view of Stack O'Lee's actions. As a black man who experienced systematic racial subjugation sharecropping in the Southern United States and traumatic violence in the Northern United States, Burnside's identification with the Stack O'Lee character is undeniable. The Stack O'Lee story helps Burnside survive an imbalanced relationship with place, land, and violence.

While Burnside's Stack O'Lee may not be a moral compass, Burnside does juxtapose Stack with Billy Lyons' abhorrent violence and places emphasis on respect as a core value worth killing for. Burnside begins the song depicting poor service from a bartender, illustrating trying times in a impoverished place: "I walk through water 'n I walk through mud/ I came to the place they call the bucket of blood / I walked and asked the man for something to eat/ he gave me a dirty glass of water and a tough ass piece of meat" (Burnside). Seeking validation from the bartender and, as a result, perhaps more satisfying sustenance, the speaker says, "I told him, 'my name Stack O'Lee'/ he say, 'yeah, I heard bout you up that way,'/ said, 'but I feed you hungry muthafuckas everyday' (Burnside). Stack O'Lee is undeserving of respect even as renowned as his reputation may be. Where a declaration of individual identity fails, Stack O'Lee reacts violently: "I pumped six muthafuckin rockets/ in his goddamn chest, you know, [chuckle]" (Burnside). The violence and humor in Burnside's language illustrates the lack

of validation that Stack receives as common, but to shoot the bartender is a violent fantasy in a racially charged disrespectful place. After standing up for his identity with extreme measures, the other patrons of the bar take note of his presence, validating his identity, but warn him of another “bad man,” Billy Lyons. Burnside remarks, “They told me then, say, ‘you name, baby, Stack O’lee, huh?/ Ya could be Stack, but you better not be here/ when that bad Billy Lyons get back” (Burnside). The warning to Stack is essential for Stack to be the hero of this folk tale. This establishes that there is a “badder man” than “bad man” Stack.

While these two characters, Stack and Billy, symbolize internal violent strife within the black community, Burnside does illustrate that while both these men may be “bad” and extremely violent, Billy’s violence is completely unjustified. After Billy walks in the bar and is warned that Stack O’Lee murdered the bartender Burnside sings, “By that time one them whores stands up, ‘Billy, please!’/ By that time he shot the bitch in both her knees” showing a clear dismissal of any moral code. In Billy’s violence against the innocent and begging “whore,” Stack recognizes Billy’s complete disregard for her identity--much like the bartender’s attitude toward Stack--and reacts yet again: “By that time one them wine heads got the light. /By that time I had Billy dead in my sight./ When the lights come back on/ Billy he was goin to rest./ I pumped six rockets through his muthafuckin chest” (Burnside). The darkness that the “wine head” produces shows that Stack’s particular brand of justice is present in the light and in the dark, in the seen and unseen--it is truly blind justice. While Stack’s code of justice may be interpreted as a sort of vigilante justice on the surface, understanding the racial subjugation and subsequent

tension in southern black communities and Burnside's own life allows for a deeper understanding of how Stack functions as a method of survivance.

Born in Holly Springs, Mississippi in 1926, Burnside learned music from blues musician Mississippi Fred McDowell among others. Burnside moved to Chicago, Illinois in the late 1940s⁴ to pursue better work as many African Americans did between 1910 and 1970 in what is sometimes deemed the Great Migration. As Giles Oakley writes in *The Devil's Music*,

Indeed, compared with the south where planters controlled the blacks' housing, their employment, their political life and their whole welfare, crushing independence at every turn, a city like Chicago provided a semblance of dignity and self-determination. (Oakley 88)

One can infer that Burnside, too, sought out this dignity in the promising Chicago city. But, as Oakley relates, cities like Chicago became places of concentrated strife and violence:

Northern cities were still dominated by prejudice, poverty, and ignorance, but in new ways. Rootlessness and insecurity were a different kind from those in the old county communities. The ghetto could be cruel and violent...giving a new dimension to the problem of finding a viable identity in a world still dominated by whites. (Oakley 89)

In the promising city of Chicago, R.L. Burnside's father, two uncles, and two brothers were murdered over the course of a single year. Burnside tells this story on the track

⁴ Burnside does not specify the year he moved to Chicago in his interview with Kenny Brown (Brown).

“R.L.’s Story” from *Wish I Was in Heaven Sitting Down* (2000). Along with detailing how his family members were murdered, he says of Chicago, “people going up down the street shooting, killing people, which it done it everywhere but they been doing it there a long time, you know, and thats a sad thing,” and “...yeah, I’m glad I made it out, man.” This traumatic loss had a profound effect on Burnside. He left Chicago and returned to Senatobia, Mississippi to sharecrop the land he grew up with.

Burnside’s return to his homeland is essential to his recovery process and reclamation of identity. The remainder of his family lived in North Mississippi, yes, but connecting to the land itself was important to recovering from his traumatic losses. When Burnside’s connection to the land was challenged two years after returning to North Mississippi, he killed for it. It is related in Burnside’s own obituary that,

Burnside shot a man who had wanted to run him off his land. The judge asked Burnside if he intended to kill the man, and he replied: “It was between him and the Lord, him dyin'. I just shot him in the head.” He was convicted of murder and sent to Parchman, the notorious Mississippi prison. After serving six months, Burnside was released through the influence of a white plantation foreman.

(Cartwright)

While Burnside’s adamant defense of his land and murder had consequences, the lingering racial hierarchy of Southern plantation and sharecropping systems--post-Jim Crow south--that attempt to force him from his land ultimately reconnect him back to his land.

Burnside's complex experiences with murder suggest a connection between land and story as reliable survival device in a racially disadvantaging system. In urban Chicago, where Burnside is not connected to the land, his family gets murdered and he has no control of the story, he cannot recognize his place in a traumatic cityscape. Chances for survival are slim and Burnside returns to a place with which he has a connection. In rural North Mississippi, Burnside is connected to the land ancestrally and as a sharecropper--working with soil and plants. He recognizes his absolute control of his life, especially when his connection with land is challenged. Voice is the ink of oral tradition. Burnside's voice is a bullet. His control of the narrative is definite, survival is secure because of his connection to land. Simply put, for Burnside, in Chicago Burnside's family gets murdered; in North Mississippi Burnside murders for his family, for the land.

The Stack O'Lee character is a method of survivance for Burnside, a character that allows Burnside to recover from trauma and recognize place and story as one, and to embody Stack O'Lee as survivor rather than Billy Lyons as victim. Burnside's unique perspective in "Stack O'Lee and Billy Lyons" demonstrates how oral tradition functions as a means of survivance. Stack O'Lee continues to be an iconic character in African American communities as survivor and perpetrator of violence. Joe Kloc relates in his article that, as a trickster figure, Stack O'Lee,

[E]xploit[s]...contradictions and in doing so illuminate[s] their absurdity.

Stack-O-Lee was just that to black Americans living in the Jim Crow south...He broke society's rules unapologetically...For all the myth surrounding him, there is

something very rational about Stack-O-Lee's character: Why follow some of society's rules when so many other work against you? (Kloc)

Extending Kloc's analysis of Stack O'Lee's function as trickster figure, Burnside embodies the unapologetic and violent character to survive in the harsh racially charged society that extremely disadvantages blacks. Burnside's extreme retaliation to land removal attempts illuminates the absurdity of lingering Jim Crow discrimination against blacks in the plantation-sharecropping system. While I hesitate to advocate violence as a means for recovering from personal imbalance, Burnside's conflicting and complex interactions with murder clearly show the functionality of traditionally oral story, Stack O'Lee, as a means of cultural survivance and personal balance with land.

CONCLUSION

While the two texts *Almanac of the Dead* by Leslie Marmon Silko and “Stack O’Lee” by R.L. Burnside may seem unrelated on the surface, the concurrent survivance through reliance on place displays a strong ecological and ceremonial message. Oral traditions themselves survive within a written tradition, a culture that relies upon and entrusts textual documentation far more than oral tradition. Sterling’s connection with land as gardener allows him to relocate the support that land offers within the stories orated to him in his childhood. Similarly, R.L. Burnside’s return to North Mississippi to sharecrop and play blues music allows him to identify as survivor rather than victim, Stack O’Lee instead of Billy Lyons.

An ecocritical perspective reveals survivance intersections and a narrative trope of identity recovery alongside land recovery. Burnside’s sharecropping land in Senatobia, Mississippi has its own significance to Burnside, just as Mt. Taylor (Woman Veiled In Rain Clouds) has its own significance to Sterling. These “return and recovery” narratives suggest how place and land play an active role in constructing personal identity, rather than a passive backdrop that identity is constructed within and freely moves about upon.

The intersections of story, place, and identity can reinvigorate environmental activism fronts as well. While my own home place of Michigan’s Upper Peninsula has an embedded history of logging and mining, there is a deeper history that connects the Anishinaabe people to the land through oral stories. One might re-consider the Anishinaabe Nanabozho stories based in the Great Lakes area as providing an update to

local environmental ethics. As the original human (part human, part spirit), Nanabozho tales are often humorous and carry a lesson with them on how people should responsibly interact with environment. For example, when Nanabozho walks through the human encampment one spring day and finds no work being done--no rice gathering, no fishing, no stories being told--he is bewildered and searches for his Anishinaabe people to ask what they are doing. He finds the people laid on their backs under maple trees drinking the sweet and nourishing syrup. Nanabozho tells his people that they should be working, preparing for the summer celebrations and gatherings. No one listens to Nanabozho and they remain content living the lazy life sustained by maple tree syrup. Nanabozho walks to the river and gathers up buckets and buckets of water. He dumps the buckets of water in all the maple trees and thins the syrup to sap. Nanabozho tells the people that they must build fires and work to boil off the water from the sap⁵.

This oral origin story reframes how one considers labor and responsibility primarily, but what if one reconsiders this story through an ecocritical lens conscious of cultural survivance? The trees' active role in this story is that of providers and, one can infer, that they become exhausted sharing all of their sugar with the people. Nanabozho is a spiritual being and acts not only to teach the people a lesson on responsibility, but to protect the maple trees from exhaustion. Reviewing this traditional story through an ecocritical lens might allow the listener to reconsider the experimental clear-cut programs that the State Forestry Program conducts in the Marquette County Region. This updated local environmental ethic might also reconsider the proposed expansions to the Eagle

⁵ Adapted from an oral story told by Robin Wall Kimmerer.

Mine Project which--already treading on the sacred Anishinaabe site, Eagle Rock--promises and threatens a “creeping industrialization of the Yellow Dog Plains” (“Save The Wild U.P.”). The applications for ecocritical interpretations of survivance narratives are bound by place and culture. Perhaps the “return and recovery” narrative is especially applicable to this ecocritical approach because of the perspective that distance offers.

Regarding injuries inflicted upon the land as personal injuries fits an ethical ecocritical perspective, especially considering groups that have strong cultural connections to place. Furthermore, the trickster characters (human and land-based) that provide examples of survivance can help inform a more ethical, ecological perspective to the study of oral traditions literature.

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