

# 'TEAR DOWN THIS WALL': BORDERS AND BOUNDARIES IN THE NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE OF LESLIE MARMON SILKO



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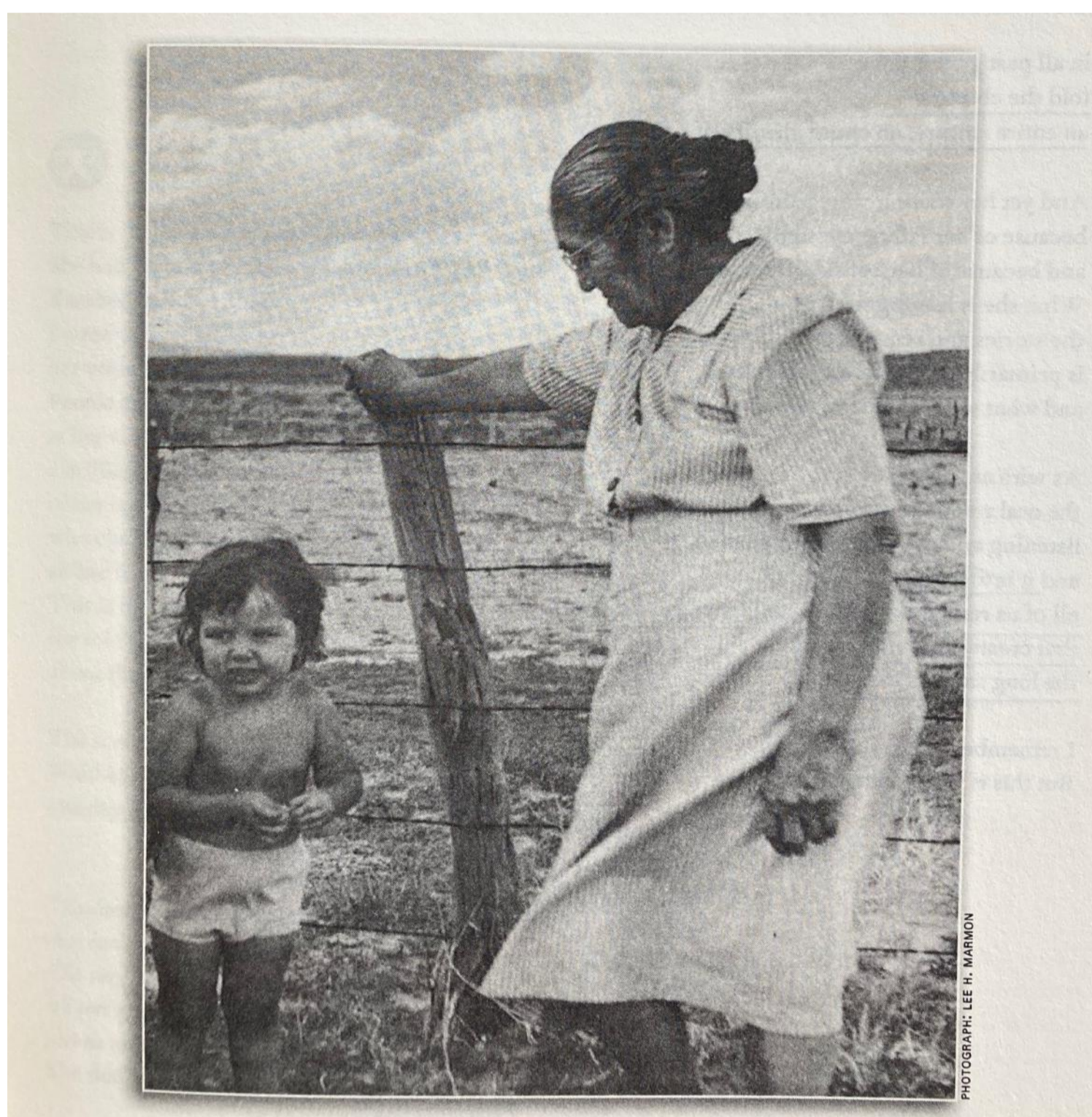
## Introduction

'Native Americans acknowledge no borders; they seek nothing less than the return of all tribal lands' (Leslie Marmon Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*)

'Our human nature, our human spirit, wants no boundaries' (Leslie Marmon Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*)

This project sought to highlight the dangers of constructing unassailable boundaries in contemporary society by exploring the work of Native American author Leslie Marmon Silko. Research focused on Silko's efforts to sketch a new vision for the Americas – one that excludes borders and boundaries, restructures the colonial cultural landscape, and facilitates the survival of the indigenous communities that inhabit it.

Aligning with the Trinity College research theme of 'Identities in Transformation', the research examined how modern-day Native American identities are associated with hybridity. In her work, Silko depicts characters who inhabit a sort of psychological 'borderlands', a constantly evolving identity that hovers between different cultures. She stresses the importance of redefining racial boundaries as 'in-between' spaces that force the negotiation of political and cultural authority.



Silko pictured as a child on the Laguna Pueblo reservation in New Mexico. In the introduction to her essay collection *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*, Silko writes of her desire to 'climb over the fence and leave the yard where I was supposed to stay'. Silko's writing challenges the legitimacy of fences, barriers, walls, and borders. She refuses to be fenced-in  
Source: Leslie Marmon Silko, *Storyteller*, p. 5.

During a period of increasing U.S. isolationism and exceptionalism, the overall goal of this research was to point to the arbitrary nature of borders and boundaries. The project stemmed not only from a desire to amplify the voice of a significant Native American author, but also to draw attention to a literature which is politically and socially transformative in outlook.

## Methodology

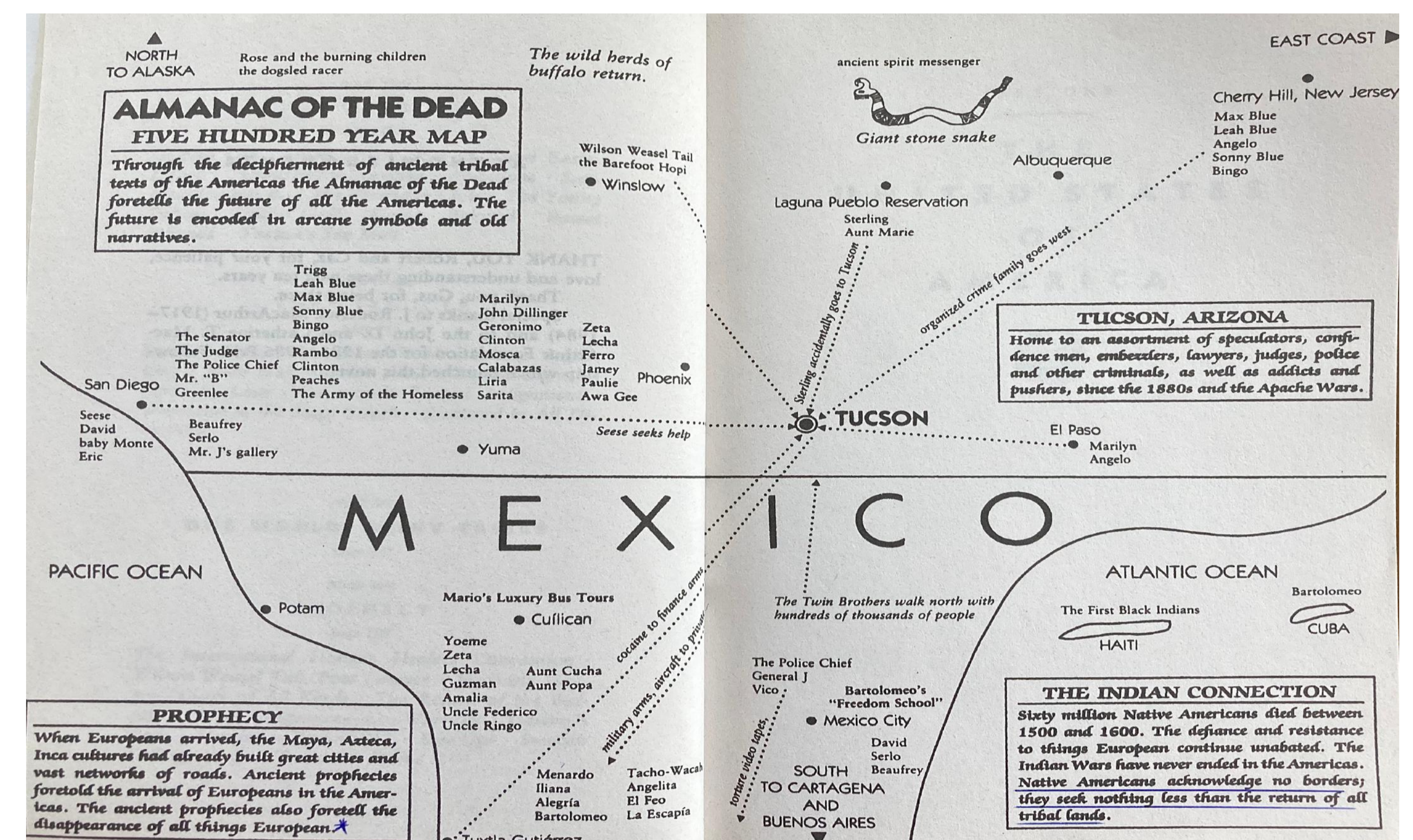
The research involved a textual analysis of Silko's fiction, poetry, personal essays, memoirs, and interviews. The aim was to gain an in-depth understanding of borders as they relate to the history of indigenous peoples within the geographic boundaries of the United States, while also highlighting how Silko's work draws on personal experience to affirm the actuality of the themes she presents.

## Works Cited

- Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Almanac of the Dead*. Penguin Books, 1992.  
Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*. Simon & Schuster, 1996.  
Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Storyteller*. Penguin Books, 2012 (first edition 1981).

## Findings

- Geographic borders:** the accompanying image shows Silko's alternative vision of an America without borders (specifically the U.S.-Mexican border) and which is mapped according to indigenous cartography. In her texts, Silko highlights how Native American peoples are connected not by their national affiliation or location on either side of a border, but through their relationship to the land.



Source: Leslie Marmon Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*, p. 15

- The borders: of identity:** Silko's remapping of the Americas is based upon redefining identities beyond nationalism and ethnicity. Her work argues that identity should be defined by how one understands one's relation to the earth, rather than by one's position in relation to a national boundary. She contends that the embrace of multiple identity boundaries, such as queer, disabled, and mixed-race identities, will lead to the production of non-standard knowledge. This knowledge has the power to become a source of connection to new communities of hybridity, and to thus enable the formation of revolutionary agency among marginalised peoples.
- Literary borders:** By drawing on the circular and oral aspects of Native American storytelling, Silko reconfigures the structural boundaries of Euro-American literary genres. The incorporation of traditional storytelling techniques and Native American myth and prayer into her work affirms how indigenous individuality is situated within a communal context. Storytelling offers a means of resisting cultural erasure and of weaving self-inscription out of one's community and landscape, rather than situating the self in relation to the boundaries of the nation-state.

## Conclusion

Upon conclusion, this research argues that, even as they function as zones of exclusion and oppression in the modern world, borders and boundaries – and the spaces between them – should be regarded as sites for transgression and transformation. Leslie Marmon Silko's work powerfully articulates this revolutionary potential.

## Acknowledgements

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