

Abandoning Hope in American Fiction of the 1980s: Catalogues of Gothic Catastrophe

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Taking as examples selected gothic works of recent American fiction—Gerald Vizenor’s *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* (1978; 1990); Patricia Highsmith’s *Tales of Natural and Unnatural Catastrophes* (1987) and Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead* (1991)—this essay demonstrates how such books fictively accelerate destructive social and economic forces and tip them over into figurations of disaster, in an attempt to liberate the paradoxically productive potential of despair.

Write in order not simply to destroy, in order not simply to conserve, in order not to transmit; write in the thrall of the impossible real, that share of disaster wherein every reality, safe and sound, sinks.

—Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster* (1986)

“Disaster,” as Eric Cazdyn reminds us in his introduction to a recent special issue of *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, is contingent, “is that moment when the sustainable configuration of relations fails, when the relation between one thing and another breaks down” (647), as opposed to a crisis: “there is something necessary about a crisis, something true to the larger systemic form. Crises occur when things go right, not when they go wrong” (649). Increasingly, critics have consequently emphasized the paradoxically necessary place of “disaster” rather than “crisis” within globalized systems of capitalist accumulation, most notoriously, perhaps, in Naomi Klein’s 2007 bestseller, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. More importantly, as Cazdyn insists, disaster obviates the utopian promise of revolution, which is

predicated on the possibility of transforming accumulated crises into possibility: any new thinking of revolution today, then, must reckon unflinchingly with the genuine predicaments of unredeemed disaster. “Compared to so much wishful thinking,” Cazdyn concludes provocatively, “bleakness and despair are always a more productive starting place from which to forge new political and intellectual projects” (661).

Curiously enough, and for reasons that no doubt have much to do with a rather horrified resistance to Reaganism (by which I refer to the entire ethical and social apparatus mobilized during the “decade of greed”), selected gothic works of American fiction from the 1980s provide such a starting point. This essay will briefly consider three very different and very difficult works, each of which to a greater or lesser extent dispense with the available mechanisms of hope: I will address in particular Gerald Vizenor’s *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* (originally published in 1978; republished as *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles* in 1990); Patricia Highsmith’s *Tales of Natural and Unnatural Catastrophes* (1987) and Leslie Marmon Silko’s encyclopedic *Almanac of the Dead* (1991). These are works that the critic Mark Edmundson largely scants in *Nightmare on Main Street* (1997), his survey of the terrain. For Edmundson, popular works of postmodern gothic aimed to achieve what he terms a “facile” transcendence; yet these novels, despite divergent stylistic orientations and thematic concerns, invoke apocalypse and, with considerable relish, describe an imminent and unavoidable social collapse. The decade was marked by the most corrupt political administration in American history, during which, domestically, an attack on hard-won labor rights was accelerated and environmental regulations scrapped, when the gap between the wealthiest Americans and the economically dispossessed increased dramatically, and when, abroad, a sequence of military interventions (Lebanon, Nicaragua, Afghanistan, and so on) opened up an unfettered world market and so freed a hitherto regulated set of “deterritorialized” flows of migrant labor, populations, ideologies, networks, and capital—when, in short, a newly “globalized” capitalism emerged, particularly after the collapse of Soviet-style communism in the eastern bloc, the ramifications of which we are only beginning to sift through and understand a quarter century on.¹ I write, at a

1. As Doug Rossinow points out, “Reagan revisionism is hard upon us” (1279). A spate of new and highly ambivalent histories have appeared in the past few years, aiming to assess the social and cultural history of the decade as well as the achievements and failures of the administration. For a thoughtful review of the extent to which these

moment when the consequences of deregulation have become glaringly clear, as the spectacular collapse of financial institutions on Wall Street threaten to destabilize the world economy. Whether this turns out to be a crisis that can be managed (and thus offer new possibilities for investment) or marks what some commentators have called the end of capitalism remains a very open question.

The popular culture of the time was ambivalent, at best, about these developments, and broadly characterized by what might be termed a “celebratory critique” of Reaganesque society; Bruce Springsteen’s mega-hit, “Born in the USA” (1984), an energetic lament for the post-Vietnam bad faith shown to the industrial working classes, was, not so weirdly after all, cited by the then President as one of his favorite songs; similarly, such films as Sylvester Stallone’s *First Blood* (1982) both mourned the betrayal of working classes and kept faith with an American mythic complex of unlicensed libertarianism and the old frontier promise of rebirth and social renewal through masculine violence, while *Wall Street* (1987), an ironic critique of junk-bonds culture and insider training, was taken to be an etiquette guide for rapacious social climbers. For a variety of reasons (the Cold War and the shift in cultural production towards the fabrication of individual subjectivities) that I have documented more extensively elsewhere,² literary production had, by this time, largely withdrawn from the American social contract, and was no longer complicit with the project of imagining America; there are no wholeheartedly Reaganite “novels,” even if various works of the time—from Bret Easton Ellis’ scandalous *American Psycho* (1991) to Bobbie Anne Mason’s *In Country* (1985) to Tom Wolfe’s *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1988)—variously diagnosed the symptomatic malaise occasioned by the administration’s abandonment of New Deal and Great Society policies of inclusion. Aesthetically, “postmodernism,” symptomatically endeavoring to spin free of the gravitational tug of historical causality, as Fredric Jameson has famously argued,³ generated the most critical buzz at the time; a mournful minimalism (Raymond Carver, Ann Beattie, and others) was likewise in the ascendancy, which blurred across class lines at times into Yuppie agonistics (Ellis, Douglas Coupland, Tama Janowitz). It was not until the

works resist the triumphant narrative of Reaganism, see Rossinow’s recent review of these works.

2. See Redding, *Turncoats, Traitors, and Fellow-travelers*.

3. See, for example, Jameson’s *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.

1990s, however, that critics began to notice another literary phenomenon of the time, which, in hindsight, appears the bleakest and thus, as Cazdyn intimates, the most compelling literature of radical dissent: postmodern gothic. My working thesis is that contemporary gothic, anticipated in these and other novels, might be a form of cultural production specific to disaster capitalism.

In his post-9/11 writings, Jean Baudrillard concurs with Cazdyn's diagnosis, although he poses the more radical possibility that catastrophe beggars the imaginations of reformers and revolutionaries alike, suggesting that disaster, while an endemic function of power within contemporary capitalism, unleashes forces through what he terms a "logic of reversibility" that propel us into an absolute beyond: "What looms on the horizon with the advent of globalization is the constitution of an integral power, of an Integral Reality of power, and an equally integral and automatic disintegration and failure of that power" (23), he asserts in *The Intelligence of Evil, or the Lucidity Pact* (2005). Baudrillard reflects on

events that break the tedious sequence of current events as relayed by the media, but which are not, for all that, a reappearance of history or a Real irrupting in the heart of the Virtual (as has been said of 11 September). They do not constitute events in history, but beyond history; beyond its end; they constitute events that have put an end to history. They are the internal convulsions of history. And, as a result, they appear inspired by some power of evil, appear no longer the bearers of a constructive disorder, but of an absolute disorder. (126)

Consequently, he concludes, "generalized exchange—the exchange of flows, of networks, or universal communication—leads, beyond a critical threshold we passed long ago, to its own denial, which is no longer then a mere crisis of growth, but a catastrophe, a violent involution" (128). An initial question to pose, then, is what *marks* that critical threshold, and at what juncture have we, however unawares, crossed it?

For Baudrillard, at any rate, any attempt to salvage or reconstruct a humanist credo from the shambles of representation would now constitute a rearguard gesture, as would efforts to renegotiate any form of the social contract, however provisional. The supplementary question I wish to pose in what follows, thus, involves whether *representation* itself is up to the task of confronting the consequences of disaster, or gesturing beyond, however bleakly or pessimistically. What might the fictions of "absolute disorder"

look like? Entertainment, to be sure, is designed to deflect our attention and to channel the panic of consumers, via a moral sleight of hand whereby virtue triumphs; this is the case, despite a recent spate of Hollywood films that are happy to substitute an existential black humor for moral certitude (think, for example, of the Coen brothers' 2007 *No Country for Old Men*). Films that dramatize the issues at stake with any sort of historical and political precision (2007's *Rendition*, for example) or imaginative perspicacity (as with the rather splendid *Children of Men*, in 2007), still tend to hold forth the promise that the ethical actions of individuals might make a small difference, and so provide a measure of consolation. The philosophy embedded in such narratives aims, in what might be termed a solipsistic utopian gesture, still to console.

Even so, the rhetoric of disaster weighs heavily and insistently upon the available (and dominant, in contemporary American cultural production) narrative logic of therapeutic redemption; prevailing stories of healing, closure, resolution, transcendence, love, comprehension, and so forth promise us a rather facile passage through and beyond traumas that turn out not to be so traumatizing—disasters that turn out not to be so disastrous—after all. In other words, we might speculate that contemporary cultural productions tend to project an awareness of “disaster” and then shy away from the implications, by dramatizing (usually in “personalized” terms) a safe passage through it. Consider, for example, the crowd-pleaser *Fight Club* (1999), wherein the implications of the anti-corporate mayhem are shrugged off as the narrator cures himself through a therapeutic act of self-directed violence and winds up getting the girl; the film defuses its potentially radical political and social message by constraining it within a story of personal therapy and redemption. Such a process involves what Edmundson, in his assessment of popular American gothic idioms, terms the commodified affect of “facile transcendence” (xv) or what Terry Eagleton, in an age more resolutely ideological, perhaps, than our own, had in mind when he argued that novels dished up an “ideological resolution of real contradictions” (176).

The work that concerns me, by contrast, imagines an apocalyptic endgame to looming social crises; rather than using the generic mechanisms of the psychological novel, these books fictively accelerate destructive social forces and tip them over into disaster, in an attempt to liberate the productive potential of despair. The most characteristically experimental or postmodern of these books, Vizenor's *Bearheart*, responding to the oil crisis of the early 1970s as well as to the flagging of the radical activism of the American Indian Movement (AIM), prophetically enough anticipates an

America where the oil (which is to say, he remarks, the national “soul”) has run out. Patricia Highsmith offers an ironic collection of various forms of apocalypse. Her writing, notoriously, is psychologically unsettling, as the safeguards of sanity in her characters guarantee no brakes against psychotic behavior; and, in her arch irony, she typically draws her readers into sympathetic complicity with all sorts of murderous machinations. Spurred by the 1978 media attention to the devastating effects of accumulated toxic waste in Love Canal and by the 1979 accident at Three Mile Island nuclear facility, and by the subsequent evasion of responsibility by the newly minted Reagan administration, the collected tales of catastrophe indulge political and economic perversions as well. In “Operation Balsam, or Touch-Me-Not,” bureaucrats charged with overseeing public safety conspire to bury contaminated waste in leaky vessels underneath the football stadium of a large Midwestern university. The culminating story, “President Buck Jones Rallies and Waves the Flag,” highlights the irresponsibility of the Reagan administration’s nuclear brinkmanship. In it, a Presidential couple closely modeled on Nancy and Ronald Reagan spitefully cause a nuclear Armageddon that destroys the entire planet. Finally, Silko’s chiliastic *Almanac of the Dead*, the most staggering and difficult work of the period, is more sweeping in its scope, understanding contemporary environmental and political crises as symptomatic of the brutalities occasioned by the five hundred year occupation of the new world. In *Almanac*, the desert border city of Tucson, Arizona, “home to an assortment of speculators, confidence men, embezzlers, lawyers, judges, police and other criminals, as well as addicts and pushers, since the 1880s and the Apache Wars” is situated at the “ghostly crossroads” of a struggle that involves the entire global population, living and dead (15). The armies of the dispossessed—indigenous peoples, slaves, drifters of every sort—enlist the forces of the spirit world to their cause, and dream of a mighty apocalypse. Rather than offering to redeem or reform capitalism, Silko’s is a prophetic book that envisions and solicits the collapse of Christian and capitalist society, drawing on the anger of five hundred years.

While these three works of quasi science-fiction might be each characterized as dystopic, they have little else in common beyond a shared renunciation of optimism.⁴ Many critics have remarked the topical, but largely unexpected resurgence of the gothic genre in the last few decades;

4. This is only partly true of Gerald Vizenor, which may be why it is the only one which has garnered much critical attention.

indeed, gothic has almost supplanted postmodernism as the term *du jour* in the critical vernacular, and there are, consequently, a variety of ways in which it has been theorized.⁵ As I will provisionally define it, gothic is a genre singular in its ethical and epistemological open-endedness. It is, perhaps, the most apocalyptic of fictional genres, and so is truly fitting of the national mood at the millennium's hinge. Gothic promises no resolution, no assurance that the universe inhabited or the world described come with any moral guarantees that the forces of order, good, or clarity will ever triumph: gothic shatters the fantasy of justice that underwrites so much cultural production and traditionally nourishes the moral bases of social stability, from the Old Testament to national constitutions to Hollywood films. In gothic works, we can never be assured that virtue will be rewarded, vice punished, or justice delivered. More radically, we might say, as virtue and vice confuse themselves in the funhouse of mirrors that is the gothic homestead, even the bargain-basement promise of understanding is also evacuated. That is, gothic subverts the very rationale of minimal self-awareness, long the privileged Nietzschean gambit of twentieth-century realism and modernism. These are works that actively dismantle consolation.

Vizenor's *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles*, as Louis Owens has commented, is persistently "upsetting" to readers, not merely because of its skewed ethics, unflinching bawdiness, nor simply as a consequence of its deep and often misogynist violence,⁶ but also because it skewers conventional and sentimentalized representations of American Indians (Afterword 247). In his own theoretical writing, Vizenor has emphasized the importance of a trickster and tribal literature working in the service of "postindian survivance," which will mean attacking and tearing down the "manifest manners," as he terms them in his collection of that sub-title,⁷ that suffuse the ideologies of domination and which stricture and determine

5. Most compelling among the theorists of gothic, to my mind, is the work of Eric Savoy. See in particular his "The Rise of American Gothic" in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (2002), where he points to "the attraction and repulsion of a monstrous history, the desire to know the traumatic Real of American being and yet the flight from that unbearable and remote knowledge" (169).

6. In response to criticisms from feminist readers, Vizenor bowdlerized the second edition slightly, changing passages in the "frame" narrative that opens the book.

7. Vizenor's collection of theoretical essays, *Manifest Manners: Narratives of Postindian Survivance*, originally published in 1994 and reissued by the University of Nebraska Press in 1999, remains the best introduction to his thinking. Kimberly M. Blaeser's 1994 *Gerald Vizenor: Writing in the Oral Tradition* is an indispensable guide to his fiction.

appropriate “ethnic” understandings: “Survivance is an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry. Survivance means the right of succession or reversion of an estate, and in that sense, the state of native survivancy” (vii). As Owens argues, the book is an attack on what Vizenor terms “terminal creeds”: rigid or inflexible belief systems that we falsely believe allow us a measure of security in the universe (Afterword 248). A satirical take on a standard spiritual quest or pilgrimage—the book references Geoffrey Chaucer, Edmund Spenser, François Rabelais, and John Bunyan, among others—the novel depicts a motley group of pilgrims under the leadership of a protagonist named Fourth Proude Cedarfair, who are making their way transversely across the ravaged continent towards the southwest. En route, in a series of comic allegorical episodes, they face a bevy of spiritual, ethical, social, philosophical, and sexual challenges, and are compelled to confront problems of chance, necessity, and spiritual transformation. One by one, depending on the nature of their sins, failures of courage, or spiritual weaknesses, they are picked off: they drop out, are punished, or (most often) killed, in a paroxysm of poetic justice.

At one point, for example, the pilgrims encounter a horde of cripples who have been mutilated by cancers and deformed by chemical pollutions: “the blind, the deaf, disfigured giants, the fingerless, earless, noseless, breastless, and legless people stumbling, shuffling, and hobbling in families down the road” (145). One of the pilgrims, Little Big Mouse, who sentimentalizes these victims of petrochemical poisoning, begins to dance, in order to demonstrate her love for them: she is savagely raped and her body ripped apart:

Proude stood back and roared in his bear voice from the mountains. He roared four times but the animal lust of the cripples had turned to evil fire. Sun Bear Sun climbed over dozens of crippled bodies. When he was near his little woman in the center of the pile he saw them pulling at her flesh with their teeth and deformed fingers. Others were taking frantic turns thrusting their angular penises into her face and crotch. Little Big Mouse was silent but the cripples moaned and drooled like starving mongrels. The lusty cripples slapped their fists, thrust their beaks, pushed their snouts and scratched the perfect flesh with their claws and fingers. The savage whitecripples pulled her flesh apart. Her hair was one from her crotch and head and armpits. Her fingers were

broken and removed. Her face was pulled into pieces, her breasts were twisted, her feet and legs pulled from her body. The cripples gnawed and pulled at her until nothing remained of Little Big Mouse. (151)

Grotesque as it is, this episode describes a literal demolition of sentimentality. The poor—the victimized, the dispossessed, the *lumpen*—will figure as the agents of revolution in many of these works, but it will no longer be enough to feel compassion, nor even to speak on their behalf. Rather, as Jamie Skye Bianco asserts in reference to Silko, citing both Chela Sandoval's *Methodology of the Oppressed* (2000) and Hardt and Negri's *Empire* (2000), “non European peoples of color represent a new transcultural and revolutionary social class, ... ‘the poor,’ ... [marking] a departure both from the Marxist politics of collective labor and those of post-industrial Euro-American working class” (9). I will return to the revolutionary potential of “the poor” as figured in Highsmith and Silko, below; with regard to Vizenor's indictment of sentimentalism here, however, it is enough to note that they are precisely beyond the available cultural mechanisms of representation itself.

To be sure, an optimistic reading of the book is available. As Owens argues, Proude, a “compassionate trickster” figure, a story-teller, and a shapeshifter, who is able to cheat death and who cultivates laughter and the principles of randomness, and his disciple, Inawa Biwide, arrive at Pueblo Bonito and “enter the fourth world as bears” (Afterword 253); his wife, Rosina, though savagely raped and left behind with her lover, the trans-gendered Sister Eternal Flame, are likewise “translated through the trickster's laughter into myth” and find “a new existence within the ever changing stories, the oral tradition” (Owens, *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel* 240). For all peoples, Owens argues, but “for the mixed-blood in particular, adaptation and new self-imaginings are synonymous with psychic survival” (*Other Destinies* 240). Yet, what is key here, for the purposes of my argument, is the absolute indictment of the Anglo-American social contract.

Highsmith likewise cedes narrative authority to a mob at various junctures in her story collection. Perhaps the most remarkable piece in *Tales of Natural and Unnatural Catastrophes* is the penultimate story, “Sixtus VI, Pope of the Red Slipper,” in which a conservative Roman Catholic Pope, modeled in some ways on John Paul II, stubs his toe during a trip to Latin America. The accident triggers a change of heart and he embraces liberation

theology. When he is killed and martyred in an uprising, the people assume responsibility for their own social and spiritual power:

A slow revolution was sweeping the world, but unfortunately causing a great number of deaths. In the next many approaches or attacks of the peasantry, even in the Philippines, the peasants and workers were more numerous than they had been in the skirmish in Bogotá that had killed the Pope, because they had time to assemble. The haciendas, factories, residential enclaves were prepared too with tear gas, firehoses, tall steel gates, and machineguns, but the fact was there were more peasants and workers than bullets. In many battles, the workers rushed over the bodies of their fallen, entered houses and took them over. Then began "confrontation," talking. The people were in the main calm, realizing their number and their power, and frequently cited the Church and God as being on their side. (159)

The tale in some sense leaves us hanging here; while Highsmith never pursues the consequences of these uprisings, she assures us, in closing, that it "was not a fad" and that the symbol of the Pope, the "red slipper," remained "revolutionary," conveying to disciples of the cause that "I am a believer still" (161). In closing, Highsmith gestures towards an affirmative, revolutionary faith.

That gestural affirmation bellows and resonates throughout Silko. Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* also describes a massive worldwide uprising of the indigenous poor, who advance on several fronts. Yet Silko's work moves beyond the satirical "survivance" of Vizenor and the cautionary, prophetic irony of Highsmith, and resolves into a full-throated affirmation of catastrophe. She accomplishes this, in a more or less deadpan and declarative style, by moving beyond thresholds of representation: rather than merely speaking *on behalf of* the dead and suffering, she enlists their voices; rather than merely speaking *on behalf of* the earth, as most environmental novels, she articulates the emerging relations between the speech of the poor and the land itself, summoning into being what Baudrillard would term an "evil" that topples the novel towards an "absolute disorder" (*The Intelligence of Evil* 126). The novel speaks from the far side of disaster, from the far side, even, of death, and dismantles the no longer "sustainable configuration of relations" (Cazdyn 647) by positing a new language and a new community that might potentially emerge in that "beyond."

From dread emerges a new language and a new community. Silko, like Vizenor, a founding figure of the post-1968 renaissance in Native American writing, is a writer who rather gleefully appropriates gothic conventions as she sees fit. *Almanac of the Dead* gives us a heroine, Seese, on the run, and a set of diabolically sadistic aristocrats. All of Silko's work, from her short stories and verse through to her more recent *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999), almost a parody of Ann Radcliffe or Wilkie Collins, comprises an inspired effort to enlist the sacred machinations of a demolished tribal past in a syncretic engagement with the potentials—and the devastations—of the contemporary. According to her scheme, history itself (under the sign of the European invasion of the Americas) has traumatically ruptured a mythic cosmology that would align legend, lore, ancestry, the land, the language, and community gossip in a seamless web with the most mundane of everyday events. "War had been declared the first day the Spaniards set foot on Native American soil, and the same war had been going on ever since: the war was for the continents called the Americas" (133). In Silko's ethical spiritualism, an endeavor which is syncretic rather than assimilationist, the armies of the dead want nothing more than the full repossession of the land: indigenous peoples and their miscegenated offspring—in the novel, Silko explicitly indicts racial purists—demand that Europeans go back to Europe.

Silko's chiliastic *Almanac of the Dead*, consequently, invokes the whole of the Americas and Africa in a struggle in which even the dead are not safe. The motley armies of the dispossessed, of the poor, the vanquished, the dead, are on the move:

The time had come when people were beginning to sense impending disaster and see signs all around them—great upheavals of the earth that cracked open mountains and crushed man-made walls. Great winds would flatten houses, and floods driven by great winds would drown thousands. All of man's computers and "high technology" could do nothing in the face of the earth's power.

All at once people who were waiting and watching would realize the presence of all the spirits—the great mountains and river spirits, the great sky spirits, all the spirits of beloved ancestors, warriors, and old friends—the spirits would assemble and then the people of these continents would rise up. (425)

So Clinton, for example, a Black veteran of the Vietnam War, now a drifter who helps to assemble an army of the homeless, describes his aspirations.

Clinton has cobbled together a sort of vagrant's cosmology, composed of the miscegenated gods and goddesses of the Afro-Caribbean diaspora and Native Americans:

Clinton remembered the old grannies arguing among themselves to pass time. The older they got, the more they had talked about the past; and they had sung songs in languages Clinton didn't recognize, and when he had asked the grannies, they said they didn't understand the language either, because it was the spirits' language that only the dead or servants of the spirits could understand. (420)

And Lecha, who has taken it upon herself to transcribe the apocryphal and fragmentary *Almanac of the Dead*, is a clairvoyant. She makes her living as a guest on daytime television talk shows, and assists the police in searching for the bodies of murder-victims. Significantly, she can only converse with the dead:

They are all dead. The only ones you can locate are the dead. Murder victims and suicides. You can't locate the living. If you find them they will be dead. Those who have lost loved ones only come to you to confirm their sorrow. (138)

Finally, as Caren Irr has noted, the book rethinks and revitalizes the long-buried tradition of the American radical novel (223-24). Among the allies in this struggle that Silko describes is La Escapia, or Angelita, a renegade Marxist demagogue and double-agent, who exhorts her people to the repossession of the land. For her, the Marxist understanding must be refigured as magical; the labor theory of value itself bespeaks an animist vision: "Marx understood what tribal people had always known: the maker of a thing pressed part of herself or himself into each object made" (520). Anticipating Jacques Derrida's spectral re-reading of Karl Marx's *Capital* (1865-94),⁸ she argues: "Poor Marx did not understand the powers of the stories belonged to the spirits of the dead" (*Almanac of the Dead* 521).

Baudrillard, to his credit, has noted the infectious link between aboriginal cultures and his own conception of evil.⁹ In *The Transparency of Evil*, he writes:

8. See Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*.

9. For an outline of the differences and similarities between Leslie Marmon Silko's understanding of the aboriginal revolutionary imagination and Jean Baudrillard's,

It is not even remotely a matter of rehabilitating the Aborigines, or finding them a place in the chorus of human rights, for their revenge lies elsewhere. It lies in their power to destabilize western rule. It lies ... in the way in which the whites have caught the virus of origins, of Indianness, of Aboriginality, of Patagonicity. We murdered all this, but now it infects our blood, into which it has been inexorably transfused and infiltrated. The revenge of the colonized is in no sense the reappropriation by Indians or Aborigines of their lands, privileges or autonomy ... Rather, that revenge may be seen in the way in which whites have mysteriously been made aware of the disarray in their own culture. ... This reversal is a worldwide phenomenon. It is now becoming clear that everything we once thought dead and buried, everything we thought left behind forever by the ineluctable march of universal progress is not dead at all, but on the contrary likely to return—not as some archaic or nostalgic vestige (all our indefatigable museumification notwithstanding), but with a vehemence and virulence that are modern in every sense—and to reach the very heart of our ultra-sophisticated but ultra-vulnerable systems, which it will easily convulse from within without mounting a frontal attack. Such is the destiny of radical otherness. (137-38)

In Silko's hands, the "vehemence and virulence" become post-apocalyptic, even, we might say, post-political. Given the intolerable conditions under which so many live, illiteracy, poverty, rampant deculturation, workaday violence and terror, the task of any political literature, then, is to participate in the ongoing invention of the unborn people under new conditions of struggle. Silko, for example, thinks of her storytelling as a conjuring, a verbal sorcery to set or keep in motion the imaginary contours of a revolutionary desire that will not content itself with limited demands for sovereignty. In *Almanac of the Dead*, she envisions a massive upsurge of the dispossessed, living and dead, who begin to walk north across the continents to reclaim the land. Silko admits in the confessional of her prose to an avowedly naïve desire that Europeans

see Regier. As Ami M. Regier points out, Silko largely renounces his Eurocentric perspective: she will neither abandon the demand for the return of the lands, nor is she particularly concerned about the effects, viral or otherwise, of Indians upon Europeans (188).

(“Anglos,” to use the favored ethnic slur of the American Indian reservations) simply pack up and go back home, leave the new world, a desire, however intemperate, purist, utopian, or impractical, however explicit or muted, which we should acknowledge to be braided and laced through all pan-Indian politics and/or cultural enactments of resistance (from Tecumseh’s uprising through Wovoka’s ghost dance, to the American Indian Movement and the Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas). Even so, her writing privileges the mixed-blood, her approach is relentlessly syncretic, a tactics, as Owens has pointed out, that takes non-Indian materials (the novel itself, the English language) and puts them to Indian uses (*Other Destinies* 26); an assimilationist strategy, on the other hand, would swallow up and incorporate indigenous cultural patterns into a generalized or homogenized utterance. As one of her characters, a drug smuggler, proclaims in *Almanac of the Dead*, “we have no respect for borders.” Calabazas teaches:

[W]e don’t believe in boundaries. Borders. Nothing like that. We are here thousands of years before the first whites. We are here before maps or quit claims. We know where we belong on this earth. We have always moved freely. North-south. East-west. We pay no attention to what isn’t real. Imaginary lines. Imaginary minutes and hours. Written law. We recognize none of that. And we carry a great many things back and forth. We don’t see any border. (216)

Silko’s heroines and heroes, her valorized and disingenuous tricksters, her storytellers and shamans, are, as in so much native writing, outlaws, when reckoned from a proprietorial point of view: adulterers, poachers, confidence-tricksters, cokeheads, revolutionary brigands, cattle-rustlers. They have no respect for “borders.” It is exactly this refusal of borders, coupled with an adamant, ubiquitous demand for (the return of the) land we are compelled to gloss. This demand for land, this trajectory across the land, these movements, this upsurge, these armies of the dead: all the throngings that strafe, possess and mobilize a voice, a language, the articulate mutation of location into locution, of locale into vocal.

The world Silko describes is populated by those who have lived *in* catastrophe at least since 1492. In closing, I want to suggest how languages beyond catastrophe might—and must—emerge, in Silko and in other writers. We are confronted with the now irrefutably “globalized” dimensions of capitalist expansion, where activists, their backs to the wall at least since September 11, are compelled to articulate linkages between,

say, the massacre of peasants in Columbia or Bolivia at the behest of Bechtel, the murderous dismemberment of tribal societies in Nigeria at the behest of Shell Oil, the Palestinian struggle for national sovereignty and the exponentially escalating Israeli “retaliation,” the war in Afghanistan, and so on, to highlight only a few of the more newsworthy barbarisms of the New World Order. Throughout this essay, I have endeavored to link contemporary gothic with market circumstances: in the aftermath and recognition of capitalist injustice, Marxism is, as Silko intimates, made magical, and revolution is imagined as something apart from workers seizing control of the means of production. Rather, it involves a gothic spawning of new life, out of the rotting corpse of everything dead and buried. In their study of Franz Kafka, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have described a minor writing, which seizes upon such circumstances. What is sometimes missed by commentators on his conception, however, is that minor writing is something more than simply the writing of minorities: rather, it summons into becoming the potential of the poor. “One can’t think,” wrote Deleuze, “... except in relation to the higher level of the single world market, and the lower levels of the minorities, becomings, peoples” (152). Minor writing, according to Deleuze and Guattari’s conception, deploys a practice of collective enunciation and communal expression that summons forth a people, inaugurates a becoming. Such writing is not simply a way of setting oneself up as a representative spokesperson for a pre-existent community, a people already there who might need, as in the Marxist experiment, their consciousness awakened to revolutionary fervor. Rather, a minority “is itself a *becoming or a process*, in constant variation ... Minorities have the potential of promoting compositions (connections, convergences, divergences) that do not pass by the way of the capitalist economy any more than they do the state formation” (Smith xliii, emphasis in original). While oppressed minorities obviously and necessarily struggle for rights, land, language, political recognition, autonomy, and so forth, their struggles deploy passions and desires that elude standardized political models. Dispossession demands more; the struggle is for life, not merely concessions; in turn, catastrophe gothic envisions the living productions and productivity of bleakness, of despair, far beyond anything we might recognize as hope.

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