

Destroyers, Desert(ed) Places, and the Reign of Death-Eye Dog in Silko's *Ceremony* and *Almanac of the Dead* and DeLillo's *Underworld*

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Leslie Marmon Silko's groundbreaking novel *Ceremony* (1977) and her long-awaited second novel *Almanac of the Dead* (1992) differ markedly in time, plot, style and tone—often to the mystification of critics and the chagrin of fans who waited 15 years for her second novel. Tayo, *Ceremony*'s protagonist, returns to the drought ridden Laguna Pueblo in New Mexico, after serving in an unnamed jungle fighting the Japanese during World War II. He was hospitalized for “battle fatigue” but he returns mentally and spiritually fragmented. He is finally healed by performing a hybrid ceremonial story through which he is able to see his part in the larger pattern of story. By *not* committing violence at the abandoned open pit uranium mine, Tayo changes the story. The mine figures prominently as the work of the Destroyers, and is the site of gruesome violence between tribal members as one of many unforeseen consequences of the “rape” of their earth mother. The story closes with a ceremonial message of hope addressed to Sunrise, the symbol of new beginnings.

Almanac of the Dead fast forwards approximately forty years and graphically exposes—through thirty-three characters and a world gone mad—the often obscene and repulsive affects of the Destroyer's witchery. The characters are lost or corrupt, and the world is on the brink of an ecological crisis that threatens all of humanity. The only uncorrupt character is Sterling, a Laguna Indian exiled from Laguna Pueblo for accidentally allowing a film crew to photograph a sacred, thirty-foot-long stone snake that had mysteriously appeared in the tailings of the mine that figures in *Ceremony*. When Sterling quietly returns a year later to Laguna Pueblo, leaving behind the trappings of Euro-American culture to which he had clung, Sterling is drawn, like Tayo, to the uranium mine, where he is able to interpret the meaning of the giant serpent's appearance. The ending can be read as apocalyptic or as hopeful—humanity's imminent self-destruction can be averted and harmony to the land restored if people will give up all things European.

In Don DeLillo's 1997 novel *Underworld*, Nick Shay, a second-generation Italian, leaves his native Bronx immigrant community for a sterile, soulless life in a Phoenix

suburb. Nick's devotion to his career in waste management rivals a religious zealot's, and his brother Matt works on secret, government nuclear projects in the desert. By exposing the underbelly of modern American culture through the Shays, DeLillo delivers an environmental and cultural message. The Shays are models of who not to be—empty urban exiles in the desert “wasteland” who are themselves wasted people. Like Silko, DeLillo presents the artists Klara Sax and Immanuel as exemplars of persons shaping a hopeful alternative future through creative, communal production.

This essay examines the American Indian and European cosmological paradigms that inform the religio-cultural assumptions, uses, and abuses of the American southwest desert by comparing elements of setting and character in Silko's *Ceremony* and *Almanac of the Dead* with DeLillo's *Underworld*. This analysis will reveal that European religious beliefs coupled with Enlightenment-era adherence to reason and science provide the rationale, and indeed the pressure to perceive the desert southwest as empty of any value except the mineral resources that can be extracted or the military it can hide. As evidenced in all three texts, the mining and military uses of the desert effect profound cultural, spiritual, and environmental damage that may result in a global apocalypse if left unchecked. Silko's and DeLillo's texts are not just hopeless visions of certain human extinction. Instead of a return to pre-contact conditions in America, Silko promotes adaptive action based on indigenous respect and care for all life on earth—and rejection of European greed—as the only viable means of human salvation. DeLillo rejects the mechanistic, disconnected sterility of contemporary American life and urges co-creative and compassionate community building through art as the means by which America can again be defined by what it creates, not what it wastes.

In all three novels, the desert of the Southwest, the people who live there, and the military-industrial complex that exploits both expose the cultural, humanistic, and ecological crises caused by Euro-American racism and greed. In *Almanac*, the Indian grandfather regales the mixed-blood child Menardo with stories of the Ancestors, with whom he sometimes discusses the current “Reign of Death-Eye Dog” or “Reign of Fire-Eyed Macaw,” a time predicted hundreds of years before when the invaders' actions would cause the sun to burn hot, the water to disappear, and the land to die. The Old Man's analysis of Europeans' scientific explanations for the universe and their religious history can be read as the foundation of Silko's critique of Euro-American culture and can support DeLillo's portrayal in *Underworld* of modern, rootless second and third generation immigrants.

[The Old Man] thought their stories accounting for the sun and planets were interesting only because their stories of explosions and flying fragments were consistent with everything else he had seen: from their flimsy attachments to one another and their children to their abandonment of the land where they had been born . . . their God had created them but soon was furious with them, throwing them out of their birthplace, driving them away. The ancestors had called Europeans ‘the orphan people’ . . . few Europeans had remained whole. They failed to recognize the earth was their mother. Europeans were like their first parents, Adam and Eve, wandering aimlessly because the insane God who had sired them had abandoned them (*Almanac* 258).

In the Old Man's analysis, the Europeans put their faith in science, which separates them from deeply rooted connections with their children and with the earth. He also finds this a logical response to having been driven out of the Garden of Eden, the biblical origin point for Judeo-Christian Europeans, “abandoned” by a “father” God,

and forced to wander the world with no hope of returning to paradise until after death forces the soul to leave the earth. Certainly it is no accident that the Hebrew people, nomads and desert dwellers constantly in search of YHWH's "Promised Land," and their spiritual descendants, the Christian colonists who came to America to build a "New Jerusalem," would eschew desert environments.

The biblical accounts of the Hebrew's lost years, wandering near starvation in the desert, and of Jesus' forty days of fasting and temptation by Satan in the desert deeply and often unconsciously influence Euro-American perceptions of the Southwest's desert environment. European perceptions of the Middle Eastern desert as a vast, barren anti-Eden, lacking food and water resources, with an overabundance of sun, heat, sand, and wind have long clouded Euro-American's understanding of the vastly different arid plains, plateaus, and desert regions of the Southwest.

By contrast, the Old Man's reading of the Europeans reveals the unique cosmology of the indigenous people who have inhabited the Southwest for millennia. They have always inhabited their place of origin; the earth is a loving mother who has not rejected the people, thus they are not "orphaned"; and their attachment to their mother the earth, and their place of birth, allows for deeper attachments to their children. The Old Man's active conversations with the Ancestors in the same scene show that the people's permanent alliance with their home allows for continuous contact with their forbears, who do not leave earth for a heavenly paradise. The intergenerational ties and communication is possible because of ancient connections to a particular place on the planet, which in turn allows for more fluid perceptions of time than the Europeans can accept.

"Old" Meets "New": Showdown in the Desert

When Europeans began colonizing the "New" world, they had to justify their theft of resource-rich land from the people whom they encountered on all parts of the continent. One such justification was the land-use theory. Because "Indians" were "nature folk"—living in "communion with nature," rather than conquering it—they had no right to possess the land, which "made them fit subjects for the same domination which whites practiced on nature itself" (Vecsey 32). Because Europeans' religion and science supported their exploitative aims by denigrating nature and "nature folk" as inferior, they permitted themselves to dehumanize the indigenous people, steal and rape their land, and force religious and scientific beliefs on the conquered tribes to force them to assimilate, or die.

Vecsey describes this vicious and self-perpetuating cycle as a racist act: "Racism derives in part from the devaluation of nature by Westerners . . . American wealth has depended on expansion and therefore on the colonialization of Indians in order to gain land to sell in order to raise capital for industry, used in turn to transform nature" (36). Initially, the colonizers exploited North America's rich natural resources to enrich the monarchical governments in Europe that initially funded the explorations and colonies. When the immigrants revolted against the European imperial governments abroad and created the supposedly-democratic United States and Mexican governments, the indigenous people were removed from their traditional homes farther west as riches were discovered on their lands. According to Silko, "[T]hey failed to recognize the earth was their mother. Europeans were like their first parents, Adam and Eve, wandering aimlessly because the insane God who had sired them had abandoned them" (*Almanac* 258). Eventually, there was no land left un-dominated or unexploited except

the desert, which they perceived as undesirable and uninhabitable.

Despite the Southwest desert's grip on the American popular and literary imagination, which developed during the Nineteenth Century, nothing could stop Twentieth Century "progress." Suddenly with the discovery of mineral resources, especially uranium, in the Southwest, and with the creation of the atomic bomb at Los Alamos, which requires uranium, the desert homeland of the ancient Pueblo tribes became valuable and instantly exploitable to the United States government in the name of national security. The westward expansion was justified as "progress" and "manifest destiny"—enlightenment era's influence merged with a twisted version of divine right. In *Ceremony*, Silko explains how the government paid the Cebolleta land grant association \$5000 (in a time of extreme drought when all the cattle were dead) to not ask questions about the holes they were digging, or why. Subterranean springs flooded the mines, which forced them to close, but not before they had extracted all the uranium they could get (225). The uranium extraction process then contaminated the spring water and left an ugly blight on the land near the people's sacred emergence spot.

The "open secret of the American West" is that the United States government hides its military-industrial complex out in the open, in the desert, within restricted areas. The "open landscapes" serve a double function as "signifiers of American liberty" and as screens that hide the desert's military use and the ensuing "environmental and human consequences." The discourse of the Western "wasteland" counterposed with the religious rhetoric of Hebrews' desert suffering obfuscates the reality that there have long been people, flora and fauna that thrive in the desert southwest (Beck 21). Unfortunately, the stereotype of the uninhabited desert had to be expanded and perpetuated to develop the largest military-industrial complex in the world, at great expense to its actual inhabitants. Hendry explains this phenomenon: "The spiritual, sentient, natural world is often sacrificed to the quantifiable public good of a waste incinerator, logging road, or uranium mine" (Hendry 8). The United States government had to destroy the cultural and subsistence basis of the desert tribes while negating the tribes' existence to justify the exploitation of "natural resources" found on tribal lands.

Desert, not Deserted

The tribes of the American southwest desert have lived continually on or near the places where their creation stories tell them they emerged as humans into this world from a previous world below. The location of their emergence is sacred and real, not symbolic and purely metaphysical. They have survived in an environment that Europeans have long considered empty, wasted, and frightening because their religious and ecological practices developed there and adapted when conditions changed. Their cultures, religions, and populations persisted much longer into the twentieth century than their tribal counterparts in other parts of North America precisely because the Europeans regarded it as an empty, dangerous "wasteland."

Because the "rational," "scientific" West has placed environmental protection in the realm of the "moral and spiritual," tribal lands and the global environment are more vulnerable to exploitation than ever (Hendry 9). As in "a second phase of the removal wars of the nineteenth century" (Beck 28), science, security, religion and romantic literature have been used to justify extraordinary malfeasance against desert lands and peoples into the present. Using the trope of the empty, barren wasteland and capitalizing on the Judeo-Christian associations of the desert with homeless wandering, starvation, and satanic temptation, the United States government poached the

desert from its ancient inhabitants, stripping it of mineral resources to build bombs and then testing those bombs under and above ground, despite its negative affects on the people, animals, and ecology.

In *Ceremony* and in *Almanac*, we see how the Laguna Pueblo peoples' land, religion, culture, self-image, health and livelihoods are affected by the United States government's trickery. It preyed on the tribe's desperate poverty during an extreme drought to extract uranium from the tribe's sacred mine near the people's place of emergence, where they had their community gardens. In an interview with Per Seyersted, Silko observes: "The Pueblo people have always concentrated upon making things grow, and appreciating things that are alive and natural, because life is so precious in the desert. The irony is that so close to us, in Los Alamos, New Mexico, scientists . . . created the potential end to our whole planet, the whole human race" (Seyersted 30). In the process of creation, the people migrated up from their previous world and their place of emergence is understood as the literal opening through which the people came up from the fourth world. The uranium mine shaft then is "a deadly counter-symbol to the Pueblo understanding of the earth as literally the mother of all life" (Jaskoski 166). Created to exploit the earth's mineral wealth, the mining is "a real rape," and the "confiscation of the earth's life-sustaining resources for the purposes of destruction . . . is fundamental blasphemy" (Jaskoski 167). When they had plundered the earth, the government left a gaping wound in the mountain—the body of the Mother—contaminated the sacred spring water, and left the earth untenable to gardening—undermining the people's ability to sustain themselves from the body of their Mother.

Tayo finally understands the larger pattern of the Destroyers as he looks down into the uranium mine: He sees that he is at "the point of convergence where the fate of all living things, and even the earth, had been laid" (228). The simple connections between his own wartime trauma, the uranium that had wrenched from the earth around him, and the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki become suddenly very clear (252). One of Mother Earth's powers had been stolen from her body and was used to destroy hundreds of thousands of Japanese near where he himself had been damaged and Rocky killed. "They had taken these beautiful rocks from deep within earth and they had laid them in a monstrous design" (258). Tayo re-designs the rocks, re-appropriates the power of his native place, and re-shapes the story that is "still being told."

In *God is Red*, Vine Deloria, Jr. writes, "Longstanding prophecies tell us of the impious people who would come here, defy the creator, and cause massive destruction of the planet . . . The cumulative evidence . . . certainly testify to the possibility of these prophecies being correct" (280). In *Ceremony* and *Almanac*, Silko often refers to the prophecies of the coming of the Europeans to the Americas, but she also includes prophecies of the Ghost Dance and the Europeans' eventual exodus. Silko writes to give voice to the powerless and the voiceless in the name of justice. In *Almanac*, she proclaims: "There was not, and there never had been, a legal government by Europeans anywhere in the Americas. Not by any definition, not even by the Europeans' own definitions and laws. Because no legal government could be established on stolen land. Because stolen land never had a clear title . . . All the laws of the illicit governments had to be blasted away" (133). *Ceremony* ends on a note of hopeful expectation that Mother Earth and the Laguna people can be restored to health if they remember their stories and honor their Mother, while *Almanac* paints a darker picture of a viable planetary future only if the European ways are annihilated

in the Americas in an explosive fashion that mirrors the European's bombing of the earth itself. There is no more gentle nudge toward a peaceful coexistence; *Almanac* forcefully asserts that Europeans stole the land, their title is false, and they must return to the land they abandoned or abandon everything they brought with them in order to stay. The prophecies of the Reign of Death-Eye-Dog reveal that the era will end when the Destroyers leave North America and return the land to the indigenous people who belong to it, who emerged from her like children from their mother.

When the thirty-foot long snake appears overnight in the Laguna Pueblo's abandoned uranium mine's tailings, the people believe it is the return of the sacred snake who once lived under the lake, Maah' shra-True'-Ee—the sacred messenger spirit from the world below. The tribal myths tell that this serpent fled the lake when jealous neighbors (greedy Destroyers) released its damn, but the people cannot interpret the significance of its sudden reappearance (135). Because tribal sacred stories are often reduced to "mundane entertainment" by Anglo-Americans, sacred sites and secrets must be "guarded from eyes that cannot understand it" or its sacred content will be profaned (Taylor 33). When the film crew accidentally records the giant stone snake, Sterling knows they will not understand what they see, but, unschooled in the people's stories, he does not understand the tribal belief that their seeing it will destroy its sacrality. He is mystified by his exile as he is unaware of the Anglos' theft of the tribe's stone "grandparents" eighty years before. As Taylor explains, "Appropriation of artifact and story, whether for museum, library, or film, is a Eurocentric strategy for possessing what cannot be understood if not mastered, and not mastered as long as it is not understood" (25). The "little grandparents" had been ensconced in a museum that refused to return them to the tribe, although for the tribe, they were sacred ancestors. Still grieving over that loss, the Elders believe that whites will steal any secret that they see, and Sterling is a convenient scapegoat since he lived most of his life among the Anglos in boarding school and with the railroad. Obviously, their fear is not without historical precedent, but Sterling did not know the stories.

Forced to leave Laguna for a mistake that was out of his control, Sterling realizes the mine had destroyed his life although he had never set foot "near the acres of ruined earth at the open pit" (35). When Sterling returns to Laguna a year after his exile, like a serpent he has molted the skin of Euro-American cultural trappings and has a new appreciation for the land and home. His interpretation of the stone snake, however, anticipates the "cruel years that were to come once the great serpent had returned" (703). Annette Van Dyke reads the serpent's appearance thus: "The snake didn't care if people were believers or not . . . Burned and radioactive, with all humans dead, the earth would still be sacred. Man was too insignificant to desecrate her" (45). Sterling knows the giant snake is looking south in the direction from which the twin brothers and the people will come when they drive out the European witchery that is destroying the tribal peoples of the Americas (*Almanac* 763). The snake's return to the open mine pit instead of to the lake is a testament to the destruction which has occurred, and it warns of the terrible time to come when humans may not survive the effects of their destruction to the land. The brothers' pilgrimage north reverses the southern migratory pattern of the indigenous tribes thousands of years before but also follows in the footsteps of the European invaders—replacing destruction with healing, isolation with unity, and ending the Reign of Death-Eye-Dog.

Waste Not, Want Not

The exploitation and devastation of the desert peoples and ecology have not ended with mineral extraction and bomb testing. Contemporary American culture “leaves behind mounds . . . of waste, not just of basic garbage but of the leftovers from industry and resource retrieval . . . mounds raised for profit, not piety, and they are everywhere” (Vecsey xvi). The isolation of many Indian lands makes them especially attractive as “sites for toxic and nuclear waste dumps” (Hendry 3), which explains why sixteen of eighteen nuclear waste sites in the Southwest are on tribal lands. The myth of vast empty space in the desert and racist assumptions that the indigenous people have little value or are already extinct turns the desert from an imagined into an actual wasteland.

The desert is further desecrated as a dumping ground for people whom the dominant culture perceive as human waste: “If the desert is the place that makes possible the testing and disposal of hazardous products, it is also the place where social waste is most likely to be deposited” (Beck 27). In *Ceremony*, Gallup is figured as highly dangerous and populated by the dregs of society. In *Almanac*, Tucson is the Mecca for disenfranchised homeless vets, the poor of every color—filled with drug runners, arms dealers, sadists, corrupt judges and cops, strippers, bikers, and general low-lives. In this land of “disposable people,” Trigg’s Bio-Materials, Inc. flourishes. He steals human organs and skin from kidnapped homeless veterans (who were formerly used by the United States government to secure the land, resources, cheap labor, and expanded markets of Third World lands for corporate profits) for transplant patients and burn victims. This “surplus” population is commodified and sold in pieces on the global market to wealthy consumers. The symbolic association of the poor and people of color with waste has long been used to justify economic and ecological exploitation of politically disenfranchised communities around the world (Harvey 3). Ironically, Trigg believes that he is “rehabilitating” Tucson by ridding it of blacks, Mexicans, and vagrants. Beck argues that the “constructed backwardness” of the remote desert southwest serves to characterize “the disposability of ‘downwinder’ communities and other casualties of Western military-industrial blight . . . [as] a class of wasted lives . . . visible and invisible, productive and nonproductive” (28). Euro-American’s constructed the desert wasteland and its indigenous people as human trash, which permitted them to literally lay waste to the land, transforming it into what it was once only imagined to be.

It is precisely the “waste populations,” as demonstrated in *Almanac*, who have the power to subvert the hegemonic power structure through collective action, since “justice is most realized in the act of storytelling” (Donnelly 253). The story fragments that comprise the novel are from “marginal people,” indicating that change will come from “the improvisations of the weak and powerless” (249). The “waste populations” share common stories of Anglo oppression and their eventual expulsion from America: “Indigenous histories form collectively and bring people together through strategies of recycling” (253). The creative responses born within waste populations aim at remaking living conditions through active transformations of one’s subjectivity.

Underworld’s Desert and Waste(d) Lives

Many of the themes explored by Silko in her two novels are underscored in DeLillo’s *Underworld* almost as if they appear on a film negative. A second-generation Italian immigrant himself, DeLillo explores the experience of the non-indigenous American in a land now known more for what it wastes than what it produces. In “Postmodern

Wastelands,” Johanna Isaacson observes that *Underworld*’s “characters rarely act but instead observe and endure the spectacle of everyday life A future-oriented lens reads *Underworld* as a kind of planned obsolescence, a mapping of its own enfeeblement and virtual eclipse” (36). This dark vision of modern American culture obliquely attests to its lifelessness and imminent decline. Just as Silko’s novels are predicated on tribal beliefs that are steeped in belonging to a particular place on Mother Earth where stories are cyclical and creative, and the past informs the present and future, *Underworld* is predicated on the immigrants’ status as “orphan people” with “flimsy attachments” to family and homeland, “wandering aimlessly” like Adam and Eve and the Hebrew people—abandoned by their fathers and their Father God. Echoing Silko’s argument that Euro-Americans have no future here because they have no past, Howard Schaap asserts in “Ravaging the Fruited Plain” that this is due to Europeans’ dispossession on this land: “[P]ostmodern people don’t know the place where they live—the earth—so no wonder they are rootless, alienated, empty” (102). After centuries living on stolen land, using stolen resources, it seems inevitable that immigrants, who left their native lands and stories, should lack a sense of belonging.

When the reader first meets Nick Shay, he is driving in the desert to visit the artist Klara Sax, who is working on a massive art installation of discontinued military planes in the middle of the desert. It is obvious that he is out of place and has bought into the myth of the desert as an empty and unpopulated wasteland. He wonders in awe that his rented car is assembled in a factory that’s “completely free of human presence,” making it a “natural match for the landscape I was crossing” (63). When he gets lost on a dirt road, he reveals his dislocation: “I had a quarter tank of gas, half a can of iced tea . . . a map that scanted the details. I would drink my tea and die” (64). Although he is humorously hyperbolic, there is true panic beneath the bravado. Although he lives in suburban Phoenix, Nick proves to be a man with no real home. His wandering in the desert is an obvious nod to the Judeo-Christian story of the exiled Hebrews aimlessly circling the desert searching for a home. When Nick encounters some people from his native New York, he uses his admittedly standard line to explain where he is from: “I live a quiet life in an unassuming house in a suburb of Phoenix. Pause. Like someone in the Witness Protection Program” (66). Nick’s rehearsed schtick avoids any true connection with others, and the reference to witness protection implies that he has not done anything wrong but is merely an innocent witness to someone else’s crime. Nick is “everywhiteamericanman”—rootless, lost, godless, unseeing, and in denial about his culpability as a European immigrant in the destruction of North American tribal and environmental destruction.

He also denies his identity, his past, and his birth place in New York. Nick is the quintessential modern man: “The modern urban-industrial society is based on a series of radical disconnections between body and soul, husband and wife, marriage and community, community and the earth Together, these disconnections add up to a condition of critical ill health, which we suffer in common” (Berry 137-38). When the reader is introduced to Nick’s home and family, the disconnections mount. He brings his mother from the East—“out of the daily drama and violence and lament and tabloid atrocity and matching redemption and how the city is hard”—and he “fixed her up in a cool room where she watched TV” (86), so sure that his sterile suburban home, where everything gets religiously recycled, is superior. When Nick describes Phoenix, it is from the perspective of someone behind air-conditioned windows watching the bland sameness of the “squat box structure” below his “bronze tower,” a glimmering turd symbolizing all the waste. He tells himself “how much I like this place” (86), not

even convinced of it himself. It is increasingly apparent that Nick is running away from whomever he was before embracing the “American Dream” in the West.

Seeking story-less-ness in a suburban desert (where the American imagination has created an oasis in the desert where there never were people so there are no stories), Nick’s marriage is in jeopardy because he will not tell his wife stories of his youth in Brooklyn. He admires “the way history did not run loose here They segregated visible history The rest was geography, all space and light and shadow and unspeakable hanging heat” (86). Clearly, Nick is trying to erase his personal history; his relationship with the environment in which he lives is built on constructed fallacies and avoidance of the truth of what the city and suburbs are built upon. Nick seems to be running from a place where he has actual connections. In his final narration, Nick muses, “Most of our longings go unfulfilled This is the word’s wistful implication—a desire for something lost or fled or otherwise out of reach” (803). Waxing nostalgic about his youth, he stubbornly refuses to acknowledge that he is dissatisfied by cutting off his stories and his connections. He drove himself away from Brooklyn but longs for “the days of disarray” when he “didn’t give a damn or a fuck or a farthing” (806). He reaches nostalgically for any time with meaning—though that too is a fiction—and he stands “helpless in this desert place” (810). Although suburban Phoenix is planted in the middle of a desert and full of people, Nick continues to use the trope of the desert as an empty wasteland to describe his sterile, perpetually organized house and barren life.

Nick desires to be the aggressive, predatory proto-typical European, wreaking havoc on the world with brute force. He wants back “the days when I was alive on the earth . . . heedless and real . . . a danger to others and a distant mystery to myself” (810). Somehow this violence appears superior to the emptiness he inhabits in a land to which he fled because of its lack of associations with the past he now opines. He is everything Silko claims the supercilious Euro-American to be, looking blindly down upon the masses from a turd tower, feeling good about his part in the world:

We were waste managers, waste giants, we processed universal waste. Waste has a solemn aura now, an aspect of untouchability. White containers of plutonium waste with yellow cautions bags. Handle carefully. Even the lowest household trash is closely observed. People look at their garbage differently now, seeing every bottle and crushed carton in a planetary context. (88)

Nick’s job as a waste manager functions as a substitute for true purpose and connection. Since he has dug up his roots, refuses to repeat his stories, accepts mediocre lifeless relationships with mother, brother, wife, and son, he comforts himself with the importance of putting waste in its proper place and refuses to recognize his wasted life.

Nick Shay never grows; he is not the hero of this novel. In a postmodern twist, the main character is a non-example, an anti-hero who embodies in a seemingly innocuous way all that is wrong with America in a postmodern world. DeLillo’s true perspective is most clearly seen through the Kazakhstani, Viktor, one of Nick’s foils. Viktor tells Nick that the Russians intentionally tested nuclear explosions on the Kazakhstani people even though they knew about the effects radiation. The Russians considered them throwaway people whom it was justifiable to experiment on, just as the United States government tests nuclear bombs in the American southwest desert near indigenous tribal lands. When Nick asks him if he believes the stories, since Nick himself erases his stories and fabricates more suitable ones, Viktor responds, “Everything is true Once they imagine the bomb, write down equations, they see it’s possible to

build, they build, they test in the American desert, they drop on the Japanese, but once they imagine in the beginning, it makes everything true Nothing you can believe is not coming true" (801-2). This seems to be DeLillo's driving imperative—if it can be imagined, it will occur, no matter the consequences. It is Viktor who reveals the corollary theme between *Ceremony*, *Almanac*, and *Underworld*. He has a Tayo moment, revealing the connections between the work of the Destroyers in the Americas, Russia, and Japan. The Western dualisms of mind/body, science/faith, man/woman, civilized/savage that grew from the Enlightenment era quest for scientific knowledge is devouring in its appetite and global in its scope. The Reign of Death-Eye-Dog is apparent in *Underworld*, and most of the characters underscore Silko's representation of the Euro-Americans as greedy, homeless, disconnected orphans who destroy to understand and destroy what and who they cannot understand.

The figures of hope and relief in *Underworld* are the numerous artists who create from objects that others consider waste. Klara Sax describes the Euro-Americans' view of the desert as the location of weapons tests because it is "unconducive to industry and progress." The weapons tests enable the government to show its "mastery" through the "visible signs of all the detonations" and buried debris (71). She recalls that Oppenheimer relegated the bomb he helped build to "the status of shit" when he named it "*merde*." Not only is it too big, evil, and other to name properly, it's garbage and "waste material" (77) that also lays waste to what it touches. Klara's project aims to question and expose the *merde* of the bomb rather than ignore or deny it. Through Klara and the novel's other artists, DeLillo seems to offer a path away from the sterile, abject barren waste of Nick Shay's modern American life. Recycling shit into more shit will not—despite Nick's faith—save us, but joining with a community to actively expose lies, death, abuses of power, and ecological devastation through art and true creation just might.

Conclusion

"Desert" is a loaded word in the Western tradition—charged with historical, spacial, literary, and religious signification. "The desert" is a multi-layered space on which people project their thoughts and fantasies, which are steeped in socio-historical and religious positions of power. In the Western mind, desert implies emptiness. Obviously this is problematic for the people, plants, and animals that have thrived in the American southwest desert. That this space is not devoid of all life should theoretically alter the perception of the desert as barren in literature and popular discourse, but the myth of the desert wasteland has been intentionally perpetuated so that the government and corporations can hide their ecological and cultural malfeasance.

The Western cultural creation of the deserted desert icon and its impact on North America's desert environment and peoples of the Southwest have roots in Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian mythology and branches that extend through the Enlightenment Era rationalization for colonial conquest. The primary deity of the Greco-Roman pantheons, Zeus, and the Judeo-Christian religions, YHWH, are both males, and the stories about both support patriarchy, the subjugation of the female (sometimes through rape and/or kidnapping), and the domination of lands and people through military conquest. Identification of the Earth with the feminine principle extended the patriarchal support for dominating women to the Earth itself. As the Roman Empire extended its influence north through Europe, the Judeo-Christian iconography traveled with it from the third century when Christianity became the official religion of the empire. Christianity was used as a tool of conquest and domination of Europe, and the pagan

religions, usually goddess and nature worshipping, were absorbed iconographically or destroyed completely.

The Christian Bible, canonized also in the third century, contains numerous accounts of Hebrew people wandering and nearly starving for years in an inhospitable barren Middle Eastern desert, searching for the “Promised Land,” and of Jesus’ temptation by Satan in the Judean desert. These biblical associations with hunger, death, wandering and the devil have infused the Western popular imagination for millennia and have greatly influenced Western literature, discourse, and politics surrounding the desert in the American southwest for centuries. This has led to a cultural blindness to the destruction of its peoples and cultures in the last century. Likewise, the biblical account of Adam and Eve’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden—their rejection and abandonment by their father-god for woman’s sin—has allowed the belief that women are temptresses, weak-willed, inherently inferior and the cause of death and separation from YHWH’s embrace to flourish. This myth also explains that their sin and subsequent expulsion from paradise is the reason that men must toil on the earth for sustenance, which creates an unnatural conflict between men and the earth they must dominate and subject to his will in order to survive—all because of a serpent and woman who could not resist the forbidden fruit.

The influence of the Enlightenment Era on the perceptions and treatments of the land and peoples of the Americas, including the desert, cannot be overstated. Its greatest influence probably stems from the dualistic split it encourages between reason/emotion, mind/body, future/past, and science/religion. These dualisms encourage scientific inquiry and knowledge acquisition over care for the body and spirit. The association of all things masculine with the good—rationality, intelligence, and “progress”—and all things feminine with the weak, deficient, and “other”—emotion, sexuality, the body, the earth, and the past—merely supports the inferred messages of Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian mythology that encourage the exploitation of women and the earth.

When the Europeans “discovered” the Americas (as if they were empty, waiting to be filled by immigrants), they found peoples with vastly different cosmologies whom they had to wrap in demeaning rhetoric and dehumanize in order to control the land on which they lived. The aims of the greedy kingdoms sponsoring the European explorers and settlers—justified by scientific inquiry and notions of civil superiority—merged again with the desires of the Catholic church to convert the “heathens” who inhabited the lands they coveted. Despite the fundamental disagreement between the forces of “reason” with the voices of “religion,” they were allies in the conquest of the Americas. In the case of the indigenous peoples, the *modus operandi* of both was to observe what is not understood; to twist what they could to their own purposes to force assimilation; and to destroy what is incomprehensible.

Besides mass genocide of millions of indigenous peoples and wholesale destruction of their languages and cultures, these Anglo-European perceptions and policies—including the iconic fiction of the barren desert wasteland—have directly led to the current cultural and ecological destruction in North America’s southwest desert region by the United States’ military-industrial complex. Long protected by the myth of the barren desert, the Southwest’s desert has been treated in the last century as an ideal location to hide the largest military installations in the world in plain sight, to test nuclear bombs, and to dump toxic waste. The tribal peoples, animals, and plants that have made the desert region their home for millennia are rhetorically invisible, economically non-productive, and therefore treated like waste—whose health, livelihoods, and cultures are beneath protection.

The tribes of the desert southwest have produced and maintained their cultural

identities through myths and stories that connect them to their ancestors in the past and the future through their relationship to the land, signified as their Mother, and the natural features of the landscape. Tribal concepts of time are circular and sacred, and the oral storytelling tradition reinforces the circular nature of life, relationships, and responsibility to all life forms in their ecosystem, on whom they depend. The land on which they live is sacred; it is where they were born not just of their biological mothers but where the people were born as a people from the Earth Mother. Their deep reverence and familial connection to the land is in stark contrast to the Western European mindset of explore, conquer, use, abuse, and move on to the next resource to strip and land to rape.

The Western mindset is naturally unsustainable—inherently racist, classist, and sexist—and leading to an imminent environmental crisis with the desert of the Southwest at its epicenter (as the location of the United States military-industrial complex and resource-leaching cities like Las Vegas, Tucson, and Phoenix). American Indian writers have become increasingly powerful voices debunking the barren desert myths and decrying the local and global ramifications of the Western conquest mentality to tribal peoples, cultures, and the environment.

Leslie Marmon Silko's 1977 *Ceremony*—now included in the canon of great American literature—and her 1992 *Almanac of the Dead* indict the Anglo-Europeans and the United States government for its ethnocentric cultural blindness to and imminent destruction of the peoples, life, and lands of the Southwest desert. Silko challenges white conceptions and insists that all life deserves equal consideration. She writes, "It was only necessary to walk with the people and let go of all the greed and the selfishness in one's heart. One must be able to let go of a great many comforts and all things European; but the reward would be peace and harmony with all living things. All they had to do was return to Mother Earth. No more blasting, digging, or burning" (710). Silko does not exclude anyone from her vision of an America free of Destroyers and witchery to end the Reign of Death-Eye-Dog; all are conditionally welcome. Although her two novels differ in numerous ways, they both argue at their cores for a return to the sacrality of the earth, a respect for all life, and the willingness to adapt when necessary to return the land to the people who emerged from her.

Don DeLillo's *Underworld* starkly exposes the military and corporate abuse of the desert southwest and the soul-crushing emptiness of the myth of sterile, suburban "safety" on stolen land where European immigrants have no roots or ties. Although Nick Shay remains on the barren wasteland that he imagines the desert to be, he is a warning of what we become when we lose contact with home, with a place on the planet, with our history and our stories. He is the other side of Silko's tales, the empty culmination of five-hundred years of squatting on stolen land, with no ancestors and no future. DeLillo's persistent motif of waste, wasted people, wasted lives, and waste "management" reflect a commodified America wasting America, building on waste and turning the land, the people, and the culture into a waste product itself. This macabre vision of America is only thrown into relief by the novels' artists who repeatedly create art from military and commercial waste material. Whereas Silko's solution (as a mixed-race Laguna Pueblo) to the human and environmental destruction of the desert and the Americas is the expulsion of Europeans and their cultural artifacts and influence, DeLillo's (as a second-generation Italian immigrant) is to encourage artistic creation in non-commodified venues to give voice to the oppressed and powerless in society.

Although their means and methods differ, clearly Silko and DeLillo share powerful concerns about the sustainability of a society, a country, and a planet that are built

upon racism, classism, sexism, and oppression of all people whom the dominant, hegemonic rhetoric identifies as an "other." How people and land are treated are intimately connected through religion, ideology, and praxis, and the devaluing of one form of life inevitably leads to the devaluing and destruction of all life. For the Reign of Death-Eye-Dog to end and the health of the planet to be restored, the message is clear: The desert is not empty; there is no wasteland but where Destroyers dump their waste; and if we collectively do not resist perceiving humans and land as waste, the Destroyers will win. All life, all stories, all beginnings will end.

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