RE-THINKING THE WEIRD (IN THE) WEST: MULTI-ETHNIC LITERATURES AND THE SOUTHWEST

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RE-THINKING THE WEIRD (IN THE) WEST: MULTl-ETHNIC LITERATURES AND THE SOUTHWEST

by

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DISSERTATION

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To my mom, Donna Koehler, for inspiring in me a love for the Southwest and to my grandfather, Robert Smith, who always loved a good western.
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ABSTRACT

My dissertation examines the genre of weird fiction, specifically texts that engage the concept of the Weird West. While authors such as Robert E. Howard and H.P. Lovecraft are often seen as the founders of this genre, I argue that ethnic and women writers, such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Ishmael Reed, Leslie Marmon Silko, Lucha Corpi, and others, explore the hidden histories of the West and Southwest in ways that incite a rethinking of the weird. Most importantly, I seek to demonstrate how the weird is not only a literary genre but a literary aesthetic and methodology that women and ethnic writers deploy against violent patriarchy and white supremacy in addition to misleading and dangerous fantasies of the Old West.
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Introduction

Regionalism and the Weird West on the Border

The western genre has undergone many reincarnations in American literary and visual culture, and its most recent iteration is the weird western, a genre that defies narrative expectations by introducing elements of horror, science fiction, the supernatural, and the fantastical into the typical western narrative. Recent examples of this kind of “weirding” of the West on television and in film include AMC’s television series and spin off series *Walking Dead* (2010) and *Fear The Walking Dead* (2015), as well as *Preacher* (2015), and films like *Cowboys and Aliens* (2011) and *Bone Tomahawk* (2015). Stephen King’s *The Dark Tower* series is perhaps the most mainstream example of a weird western, which has been adapted to film (2017) and is in production to become a television series. Other writers who weird the West in popular fiction include China Miéville, Jack Ketchum, and Joe R. Lansdale. Like the dead that often inhabit its pages, the Weird West resurrects old myths about the region to overturn them, but it is largely told from the purview of white, heterosexual men, usually American or British, with some women, such as Emma Bull and Nancy A. Collins. This dissertation considers how ethnic and women writers have weirded the West long before it became popular or part of the domain of white, heterosexual men and some women. The study brings together literary works by Anglo, Black, Chicana/o, and Native American writers, some of whom are closely tied to the Southwest and others whom are lesser-known or under-studied in discussions of western and southwestern American literature, weird or otherwise.

The Weird West is unique in that it dialogues with two distinctly American literary traditions: the western and weird fiction. Most scholars contend that James
Fenimore Cooper’s *The Leatherstocking Tales* and Owen Wister’s *The Virginian* are the earliest examples of the western, both taking place on the frontier, an iconic American space that offers “the opportunity for renewal, for self-transformation, for release from constraints associated with an urbanized East” (Mitchell 5). Lee Clark Mitchell observes that the western landscape in these texts assumes a “space removed from cultural coercion, lying beyond ideology,” offering “the most ideological of terrains” (4). Both weird westerns and traditional westerns are retrospective, focusing on a West of the past or one that is slowly fading into history—more often than not, a mythic West that never was, which makes the western “a peculiarly flexible form” that is “available to an array of ideological issues” (5). In her study *Exploding the Western: Myths of Empire on the Postmodern Frontier*, Sara Spurgeon interrogates this nostalgia; instead of focusing exclusively on the western genre, Spurgeon looks at the frontier myth itself, observing that “myths are not history,” but they “are what we wish history had been,” making them powerful narratives that continue to influence American national identity (3). Both Mitchell and Spurgeon argue that the western and the frontier myth are part of particular cultural anxieties about the society in which they are produced. For Mitchell, the western’s ultimate concern is with representations of male cowboys, contending that the western genre is “deeply haunted by the problem of becoming a man” (4). That white heterosexual and predominantly male writers are dominating the mainstream market right now is not surprising, given the history of violence and constructions of gender that shape the West.

The violent conflict with indigenous communities and the supposedly feminine West has propped up American culture and civilization rooted in the East. Spurgeon
explores how western myths involving gender and race “have become inextricably linked through the ongoing experiences of imperialism and globalization in a transformative, dialogic process” (9), which more accurately characterizes the purview of the weird western.

H.P. Lovecraft is often considered the forefather of weird fiction, and he argued that America’s origins are uniquely weird, since they contain “the usual dark folklore” of Europe as well as “an additional fund of weird associations to draw upon” (60). Lovecraft imagined that his Puritan ancestors faced “vast and gloomy virgin forests in whose perpetual twilight all terrors might well lurk,” as well as “hordes of coppery Indians whose strange, saturnine visages and violent customs hinted strongly at traces of infernal origin” (60). He draws upon weird elements from the fiction of Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne, but most scholars argue that weird fiction originated around the turn of the twentieth century with authors such as Lovecraft himself: Algernon Blackwood, Arthur Machen, M.R. James, Lord Dunsany, Robert E. Howard, and others who appeared in the pulp magazine *Weird Tales* (1923-1954), subtitled “A Magazine of the Bizarre and Unusual” (Luckhurst, “The Weird” 1042). *Weird Tales* was a series that was the first of its kind and “served as a crucible for genre exploration, creation, and hybridization at a very particular time and place in American culture” (Everett and Shanks xvi). The editors of this magazine thought of themselves as filling a void between the formulaic works churned out by other pulp magazines and highbrow literary modernism while still marketing its content towards the masses (xi).

Led by Lovecraft, *Weird Tales* and those influenced by Lovecraft’s work “created a community of writers that were quite self-consciously inventing a new mode of
expressing horror in fiction” (xiv). However, many readers in literary circles did not see the difference between *Weird Tales* and other pulp magazines of its time, meaning that publication in pulp magazines doomed these stories to the category of lowbrow fiction, leading to their relative obscurity and later dismissal by academics (Luckhurst, “American Weird” 199). In “Vaqueros and Vampires in the Pulps: Robert E. Howard and the Dawn of the Undead West,” Jeffrey Shanks and Mark Finn define pulp magazines as, “Direct descendants of the dime novels” since their “origins in the Populist movement were reflected in their egalitarian treatment of their readers, their focus on entertainment over information, their disdain for any high-minded notions of society or style, and their economical value” (4).

Still, critics continue to argue for the literary value of the weird western and the theme of the monstrous. Jeffrey Weinstock presents a generally agreed upon definition of weird fiction as “late nineteenth and early twentieth-century stories that undercut anthropocentrism by thematizing the insufficiency of science and human reason to comprehend the universe” (182-3). As Roger Luckhurst explains, there is a difference between psychological narratives that turn on the uncanny and weird element of the monstrous. In Luckhurst’s words, “The uncanny is a series of displacements that always leads back to the ultimate familiar home: the womb. The interpretive machinery of the uncanny thus inherently domesticates. In contrast, the monstrous breaches of the weird do not return us to something familiar but repressed, but instead veers away to invoke a dread that is irreducible, that cannot be reductively interpreted, translated or returned” (“The Weird” 1052). Weird fiction is also distinct from fantasy, which many critics argue emerged around the same time as weird fiction with writers such as Robert E. Howard
and J.R.R. Tolkien. Mark Fisher argues, “Fantasy is set in worlds that are entirely different from ours” while the weird can only exist within our world (19). The weird is also not predicated on horror, suspense, or the supernatural. Like fantasy, the supernatural is not weird because the reader knows that figures such as vampires or werewolves do not belong to their world. The appeal and revulsion of the weird hinges on the idea that the weird object initially seems to be otherworldly but is ultimately revealed to be very much a part of the reader’s world.

Fisher employs the metaphor of a black hole, since “the bizarre ways in which it bends space and time are completely outside our common experience, and yet a black hole belongs to the natural-material cosmos—a cosmos which must therefore be much stranger than our ordinary experience can comprehend” (15).

Likewise, Lovecraft defined weird fiction in 1925 as “a literature of cosmic fear.” In Lovecraft’s words:

The true weird tale must have something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule. A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain – a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of un plumbed space. (10)

Lovecraft’s definition focuses more on affect than on form, leading Weinstock to conclude that weird fiction “is thus less a discrete genre than a pessimistic orientation to
human potential” (183). Moreover, Lovecraft saw weird fiction as distinct from Gothic fiction, leading Everett and Shanks to argue that Lovecraft “freed Gothic horror from its Judeo-Christian cosmological framework and replaced it with the more terrifying reality of the insignificance of man in the vast materialistic and mechanistic cosmos” (xiv).

Ann and Jeff VanderMeer see the weird more optimistically, as a genre that “acknowledges that our search for understanding about worlds beyond our own cannot always be found in science or religion and thus becomes an alternative path for exploration of the numinous” (5). New Weird fiction, they argue, proposes to distinguish itself from Old Weird fiction due to “its political consciousness and metanarrative awareness,” but the contention that Old Weird fiction lacks a political consciousness dismisses the very political underpinnings of this writing. For example, Lovecraft has long been criticized for his eugenic views, which Mitch Frye argues are “virtually inextricable” from his literary works, and which can be seen as warnings to his Anglo-Saxon readers of the “rising tide” of racial others (238-9). As Jodi Ann Byrd points out, weird fiction has always been tied to issues of race and empire. She observes that,

H.P. Lovecraft and Edgar Allan Poe wrote macabre tales in a new world that was haunted by prior presences that terrified them in the possibility that they might one day rise against the order modernity has imposed. Robert E. Howard and J. R.R. Tolkien created ancient worlds to narrate the modern nation-state into imperial allegories of domination and resistance against monstrous savages who threaten the civilized order of humankind. (355)
As Luckhurst has observed, “just as the Old Weird peaked with imperialism at the end of the nineteenth century, the New Weird emerged in the era of globalization and borderless ‘Empire,’ to whisper dark fantasies of the underside of uneven development again” (203). Fisher agrees, noting that the “problem of worlds—of contact between incommensurable worlds” is at “the heart of the weird” (28).

The “contact between incommensurable worlds” is perhaps best illustrated in the borderlands of the Southwest and the frontier. Luckhurst contends that weird fiction “is a fiction of strange zones and borderscapes, its monsters boundary-crawlers that slime all over generic quarantines, making borders less lines of separation than promiscuous contact zones” (1055). One weird story that demonstrates this contact is Robert E. Howard’s “The Horror From the Mound” (1932), what Shanks and Finn describe as “arguably the first undead Western” (3). Lovecraft nicknamed Howard “Two Gun Bob,” because he was born in 1906 in Texas (Indick 99). Howard’s most recognized character is Conan of Cimmeria, who later became known as Conan the Barbarian and helped launch the “sword and sorcery” fantasy genre, which “blends historical adventure fiction with Gothic or Lovecraftian horror” (Everett and Shanks xv). Unlike traditional fantasy fiction that preceded Howard, in sword and sorcery fiction “the supernatural element is often portrayed as unnatural—intruding into the story world and threatening the existing paradigm rather than being a natural, inherent part of the world” (xv). But Howard was most interested in the western genre, which he focused on towards the end of his life. He found minor success as a “Southwestern humorist,” publishing numerous western tales featuring good-natured but bumbling protagonists, such as Breckinridge Elkins (Finn 74). Most significantly, however, Howard is also often cited as the first to combine the
western genre with weird fiction, in the process mixing two distinct genres to create a hybrid form that was considered monstrous in its own way, as the reception of his work in *Weird Tales* was “uneven” (Shanks and Finn 10).

Howard was extremely proud of his Texan heritage and often wrote of the profound influences the stories he heard in childhood had on his writing. Significantly, many of these stories were told by “his family’s cook and laundress, both formerly enslaved African American women, who told him stories of their youth, their time in slavery, and the ghost stories of the region” (19). These women were Mary Bohannon and Arabella Davis, and Howard called Davis “a black philosopher, if there was ever one” (Louinet 4). Black women’s voices served as Howard’s inspirations and they signal a real racial history that haunts the West and the greater American imaginary.

“The Horror From the Mound” narrates the carnage that ensues after the cowboy protagonist unwittingly unleashes a dormant Spanish vampire after disturbing an Indian mound in which the monster was buried. As Shanks and Finn observe, this story is a retelling of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) but in the reverse: “In *Dracula*, a Texan travels to Europe and takes on a vampire in the undead creature’s own territory; in ‘Horror,’ a European vampire travels to Texas and is defeated by a local gunslinger” (9). But the weird aspect of the work stems from the differing cultural beliefs that the story foregrounds with the text’s first line: “Steve Brill did not believe in ghosts or demons. Juan Lopez did” (30). Steve Brill, an Anglo-Texan cowboy turned unsuccessful farmer, becomes fascinated with a burial mound near his property. He asks his neighbor Juan Lopez to assist in its excavation, but Lopez refuses to help, knowing from folklore and family stories that sometimes it is, “Best not to disturb what is hidden in the earth” (30).
With Lopez’s tales, the text acknowledges the specific regional history of the setting.

Brill notes that “Of all the continent of North America there is no section so haunted by tales of lost or hidden treasure as is the Southwest” (31). Excited by fantasies of hidden treasure, Brill dismisses Lopez’s warning and digs into the mound, releasing a mysterious creature. The seriousness of the matter is soon revealed when Brill discovers Lopez’s bloodied corpse and hastily penned history of what truly lay trapped within the mound, a history to which Anglo Brill was not privy.

From Lopez’s manuscript Brill learns the origins of the monster: “a certain foul nobleman who had lurked, in the mountains of Castile since the days of the Moors, feeding off the blood of helpless victims which lent him a ghastly immortality,” and who later insinuated himself into the fictional Hernando de Estrada’s 1545 expedition of the Southwest (34). The monster’s name is Don Santiago de Valdez, roughly translated to “the blood of the valley;” “Santiago” is also the name for San Diego, the patron saint of Spain. Don Santiago is the (undead) reminder of the violence that was transplanted from the Old World to the Americas: not only does he signify the bloody extermination of indigenous peoples by Spanish explorers, but also the exploitative feudal economic system that kept many Spanish, later Mexican, and indigenous people in poverty. As Brill ultimately defeats the vampire through psychical violence, the story’s conclusion destroys the remnants of the past by burning the body of Don Santiago: “Looking back he saw the flames of the burning house and thanked God that it would burn until the very bones of Don Santiago de Valdez were utterly consumed and destroyed from the knowledge of men” (37). At this moment, Brill and Howard turn away from the weird, instead choosing ignorance of the monsters of the past that Don Santiago’s existence has
revealed. However, the ethnic and women writers in my study do not turn away from the weird. Instead, they resurrect it and refuse to give the reader such a reassuring conclusion.

Weird fiction expands the reader’s perception of the universe, forcing them to rethink concepts they once thought were stable. Indeed, the tension sustained in weird fiction, Fisher argues, “involves a sensation of wrongness: a weird entity or object is so strange that it makes us feel that is should not exist, or at least it should not exist here” (15). Fisher continues: “Yet if the entity or object is here, then the categories which we have up until now used to make sense of the world cannot be valid. The weird thing is not wrong, after all: it is our conceptions that must be inadequate” (15). The texts I will examine demonstrate how women and ethnic writers have engaged with weird tropes in literary texts, long before the likes of Lovecraft, in order to challenge white supremacy and patriarchy. Moreover, these texts more fully embody Fisher’s definition of the weird since they challenge the reader’s conception of reality. Unlike Howard, however, these women and ethnic writers refuse a conclusion that ultimately buries the past yet again.

Some works in my study, such as “The Giant Wistaria,” have been labeled gothic, but it is more productive to view them in light of the Weird West. The uncanny assumes that the object in question is the repressed familiar, a concept that lies at the heart of the gothic. As Renée Berglund argues of much nineteenth-century American literature written by European Americans that feature a ghostly Native presence, “Although Native Americans can be said to have taken possession of the American imagination, this means that they have vanished into the minds of those who have dispossessed them” (3). Berglund is ambivalent about this gothic approach for contemporary literature, stating
that while on the one hand “Native Americans construct ghosts that call for the return of the land, for justice, and for the wholeness of stories and of memory,” on the other hand, “in the minds of white men, Native American ghosts continue to create political amnesia and a nationalist imaginary that locates all native people within the white American self, and authorizes the theft of native land” (169). In contrast, as Fisher points out, the weird does not attempt to reintegrate the object of anxiety into the subject’s worldview but rather reveals the limitations of that worldview by allowing the reader “to see the inside from the perspective of the outside” (10), thus centering ethnic and women writers’ voices and putting hegemonic western culture under scrutiny. This method is particularly productive for ethnic and women writers since it refuses the idea that their worlds are simply an offshoot of an Anglo-European individual’s repressed anxieties.

My first chapter examines the feminist Wests in the works of two women writers, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Giant Wistaria” (1891) and Dorothy Scarborough’s The Wind (1925). While the domestic is typically configured in opposition to a hostile, uncivilized frontier in western literature, Gilman and Scarborough demonstrate that the home itself is a frontier, one that is often brutal and destructive to women. Although Gilman is not considered a western writer and is more popular for her short story “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” her little-known short story “The Giant Wistaria” intervenes in the gender politics of local color writing and weirds the natural landscape in a way that preempts the Weird West. By analyzing Gilman’s story alongside her personal history in California, the chapter rethinks her place in discussions of regionalism and local color writing. Meanwhile, Scarborough tells about a young woman forced to leave her southern plantation home for West Texas after her mother’s death. The wind itself becomes a
character and plot device. Letty is haunted by the wind, which becomes like a “demon lover,” but she is equally haunted by the seemingly idyllic southern life she leaves behind. The novel suggests a more critical perspective of Letty and her romantic regionalism, which cannot adapt to the racial or environmental landscape of West Texas. Instead of painting a heroic picture of pioneering Anglo men and women, Scarborough shows how the past continues to haunt and violate the present. Like the wind, this violence will not go easily. Both stories complicate the mythical, regenerative quality of the western frontier by weirding the natural landscape and unearthing the histories that haunt local color and the West.

Chapter Two explores Ishmael Reed’s *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969), a work typically discussed in conversations regarding the Black Arts movement but rarely mentioned in conversations about the Weird West, even though it contains many of its generic hallmarks, such as the supernatural and elements of science fiction within a western setting. Yet Reed diverges from western and weird western fiction in significant ways. His protagonist, the Loop Garoo Kid, is a Black cowboy and hoodoo priest, reversing the perspective maintained in Howard’s short story “Black Canaan” (1936). The hero of Howard’s tale, a white cowboy named Kirby Buckner, quells a rumored uprising of the Black citizens of Grimesville, who are held under the spell of the evil African conjure man, Saul Stark, and his assistant, a beautiful Black woman whose sexuality disturbs Kirby. In Reed’s novel, the Kid ultimately triumphs over the evil American government officials who seek to subdue him, and he rides off into the sunset as a hero, in the process redeeming Black sexuality and culture. Reed employs elements of the Weird West even while he revises them in order to critique exclusionary western
narratives that write out the experiences of African Americans. Putting Reed and Howard in conversation reveals the ways these authors engage with issues of race and gender through weird or alternative dimensions that call into question accepted narratives of the West. While Reed weirds the West in order to make room for Black and other marginal subjects in the Western genre, his text cannot avoid reifying the very form of dominant masculinity that his work sets out to critique, which haunts his novel and seems to be the ontological trouble with the Weird West. The chapter thus explores the complicated intersections of race, class, and gender that exclude Black men from attaining power and that open up the western frontier to new forms of racial expression.

My third chapter looks at Leslie Marmon Silko’s formative novel *Ceremony* (1977), which continues to endure as a novel about the destructive forces of colonization and modern warfare in Native America. This chapter revisits the Weird West from the perspective of Silko’s novel, which presents alternative dimensions of both the real and the supernatural that challenge the beginnings and the premises of the Weird West. I argue that Silko weirds the Southwest by underscoring its unsettling similarities to seemingly disparate places such as Alaska. When considering the novel’s place of origin, Alaska, the incongruity of geographical space, to borrow a phrase from Fisher, “brings to the familiar something which ordinarily lies beyond it” (10-11). The novel’s alternative sense of time and narrative space challenge isolationist narratives of the Southwest, but Silko also reframes the region from within a global context that links imperial histories of place and reorients the Weird West to make room for indigenous narratives.

The next chapter focuses on Chicana/o detective fiction, especially Lucha Corpi’s *Black Widow’s Wardrobe* (1999) and Rudolfo Anaya’s *Zia Summer* (1995), whose weird
elements are seldom recognized. Corpi’s Chicana detective, Gloria Damasco, uses her “dark gift” to solve complex murder cases. Meanwhile, Anaya acknowledges the validity of Mexican and Mexican American folklore with his Chicano everyman, Sonny Baca, who is both shaman and sleuth. These writers disrupt hegemonic conceptions of the detective genre, but the genre-mixing that characterizes their work also points to alternative Southwestern histories often neglected or appropriated in mainstream narratives about the West. I argue that Chicana/o detective novels are “mestiza/o” detective narratives that are part fiction, part history, part logic, part supernatural. As Anzaldúa explains of the mestiza, “Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else” (101). Corpi and Anaya create more politically-aware and culturally-based mysteries by weirding the detective genre expectations. Both authors engage with the character of La Malinche, although from differing views. The chapter reads these two novels closely and within the larger context of the sleuthing Baca and Damasco mysteries to illustrate the ways Chicana/o detective writers weird the Southwest.

The final chapter in my study examines Leslie Marmon Silko’s Almanac of the Dead (1991) and Anna Lee Walters’ Ghost Singer: A Novel (1988). Silko’s novel in many ways critiques the critical reception Ceremony has received in academic and commercial circles. In her second novel, Silko engages with the South American drug and gun trade, Mayan prophecies predicting the end of Western civilization, and the future of indigenous rebellion. In the process, she weirds expectations of the Native novel that Ceremony helped to create. Walters’ novel is set in the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History and was written prior to the 1990 passage of the Native American Graves
Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). The novel weirds the scientific space of the museum by marking it as a site of multiple hauntings where indigenous spirits haunt white anthropologists, just as the absence of tribal artifacts and stolen remains of their ancestors haunt indigenous communities. As Rebecca Tillett observes of Walters’ novel, “the monstrous is situated within the power and agendas of academia; within the construction of ‘national’ history through the silencing of minority voices, and the consequent power and authority assumed by ‘legitimate’ or legitimating historians” (86). However, the novel also engages with the hidden history of the slave trade among North American tribes, specifically the Navajo and Spanish colonizers, which continue to haunt attempts at intertribal cooperation and community. Walters and Silko weird two material objects that Western society holds dear: the museum and the map. Walters demonstrates that the past is still affecting the present and brings awareness to the trafficking of (dead) Native bodies and the erasure of Native people in academic spaces. Silko animates the borderlands, restoring to it the four-dimensional reality that the material map flattens: borders are ghostly, not real, but they still have real negative consequences for the bodies that cross them. Through these narrative techniques, Walters and Silko contribute to the critical project of indigenous history and the re-writing/righting of the past.

People of color in the Weird West are often the sources of weirdness or strangeness, especially in the work of Robert E. Howard, but for the writers assembled in this project, the so-called cultural norms and triumphalist histories that prop up the West are what cause strange or supernatural phenomena. The weird is productive for these writers since it enables them to expand their reader’s worldview to make clear that the writer’s identity or culture is not monstrous or alien, but that the reader’s perceptions
based on western myths have blinded them to the true extent and content of the world around them. By extending the timeline, spatial boundaries, and generic expectations of what the Weird West looks like, we can acknowledge how ethnic and women writers have been using these techniques as methodologies of resistance before there was an Old or New Weird.
Chapter One

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Dorothy Scarborough, and the Weird Feminist West

Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Dorothy Scarborough are two women writers whose work explores elements of weird fiction. These women writers are usually seen as regionalists, never as writers of the weird, perhaps because critics of weird fiction rarely recognize the contributions of female writers. In *The Weird and The Eerie* (2016), Mark Fisher considers H.P. Lovecraft not so much a fantasy or horror fiction writer but a writer of hyperrealism, even though Lovecraft himself rejected the literary category of realism. Still, “the weird,” Fisher argues, “entails a certain relationship to realism” (20). As Lovecraft explains in a 1927 letter to the editor of *Weird Tales*:

> Only the human scenes and characters must have human qualities. *These* must be handled with unsparing *realism* (not catch-penny *romanticism*) but when we cross the line to the boundless and hideous unknown—the shadow-haunted *Outside*—we must remember to leave our humanity and terrestrialism at the threshold. (*Selected Letters* 150)

Lovecraft relied on realism to draw comparisons between the known world and “the shadow-haunted Outside,” revealing in the process the relationship between the real and the supernatural.

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1 Fisher interchanges the terms realism and naturalism, but his definition is closer to realism as revealed in this quote: “But Lovecraft’s emphasis on the materiality of the anomalous entities in his stories means that he is very different from the Gothic novelists and Poe. Even though what we might call ordinary naturalism—the standard, empirical world of common sense and Euclidean geometries—will be shredded by the end of each tale, it is replaced by hypernaturalism—an expanded sense of what the material cosmos contains” (18).
Charlotte Perkin Gilman’s story “The Giant Wistaria” (1891) is set in New England and forges a weird social commentary and critique, like so much of Lovecraft’s work. Fisher notes “the supreme significance of Lovecraft setting so many of his stories in New England,” and concludes that “Lovecraft contained or localised realism” (19 and 20). Curiously, Fisher does not discuss or even invoke regionalism, perhaps to maintain the aesthetic bias of realism. Much like weird fiction, regional literature historically exists outside the boundaries of serious literary consideration. The gendering of these genres is noteworthy. Nearly all studies of weird fiction concern men, and although Fisher includes three women in his study, the lack of commentary on regionalism is related to the male-defined discussion of the weird. Regionalism as a literary tradition has all too often been defined as minor, a sub-set of realism, and largely women’s work, as Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse argue in Writing Out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture (2003). Regionalism fosters a radical critique of the nation-state, and this is why much of American literary history has devalued or marginalized regionalism with the claim that it is “too specific,” as Fetterley and Pryse explain (35-36). In “The Spinster in the House of American Criticism,” Caroline Gebhard comes to a similar conclusion. As Gebhard observes, “the connection between local color and effeminacy is so well-fixed in critics’ minds that when they wish to reclaim particular writers for more serious treatment, they often adopt the strategy of arguing that the writer is not a local colorist after all” (83). Gilman and Scarborough’s feminist Wests weird the local color tradition through an engagement with a regional aesthetic that both employs and challenges realism through their use of the supernatural.
“The Giant Wistaria” relies on the interplay between the New England frontier and the European Old World for its unsettling effect and critique of nineteenth-century patriarchy, but its concern with the actual story itself and the gendering of this concern is what makes the story relevant to a discussion of regionalism and women’s writing. The characters in Gilman’s story search for clues to their vacation home’s past, with the women swearing that it must contain “a story, if we could only find it,” despite the ridicule of their male companions (168). Meanwhile, Scarborough’s The Wind (1925) offers a profoundly feminist critique of the West by pairing the supernatural with western tropes to challenge gender roles and white, middle class values. While the home is typically configured in opposition to a hostile, uncivilized frontier in western literature, Gilman and Scarborough demonstrate that the home itself is a frontier, one which is often brutal and destructive to women. The initial action of Gilman’s story is set at least one hundred years prior to the late nineteenth century, when Scarborough’s story is set, and both narratives rely on “natural” elements of the environment to complicate the concept of the mythical, regenerative quality of the western frontier. Letty Mason, the protagonist of The Wind, must contend not only with the relentless wind but also her own misguided southern nostalgia that haunts her present. Meanwhile, Gilman unearths New England’s haunted domestic past. Both Gilman and Scarborough weird regional literature before the weird became a genre unto itself and long before Lovecraft would come to define weird fiction.

Gilman remains most known for her short story “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” published one year after she drafted “The Giant Wistaria,” at least according to Denise Knight, who maintains that Gilman actually drafted the latter story in July 1886—not
March 1890, as previously believed (174). This means that Gilman wrote the story “less than a year before she underwent S. Weir Mitchell’s rest cure for neurasthenia, with dire consequences” (175). Although Gilman is rarely considered a western writer, she had strong ties to the West, specifically California, leading Jennifer Tuttle and Gary Scharnhorst to observe that her “long residence in the East belies a more complex regional affiliation” (13). During extended stays and visits, Gilman lived in Pasadena, Oakland, and San Francisco, all coinciding with periods of personal upheaval, roughly between 1888-1893 and from 1934 until she committed suicide in 1935 in Pasadena after being diagnosed with breast cancer. Her first trip west occurred after her nervous breakdown following the birth of her daughter in 1885, a condition that Dr. S. Weir Mitchell notoriously exacerbated with his now infamous rest cure. Interestingly, at about the same time, Dr. Mitchell also treated Owen Wister, author of *The Virginian* (1902), a novel which has come to define the western genre and perhaps benefitted from Dr. Mitchell’s treatment. While Dr. Mitchell urged his female patients to rest and avoid any strenuous activities, he frequently suggested to his male patients “a treatment that embraced the masculine prerogatives of freedom and independence and contributed to the West’s preeminence as a popular site for health tourism” (Scharnhorst and Tuttle 15). After rest failed to cure her, however, Gilman headed cross-country to California for a cure of her own in 1888, leading Scharnhorst and Tuttle to declare that the “West, not rest, rejuvenated her” (15).

Divided into two sections separated by over a hundred years, “The Giant Wistaria” opens with a young, unwed mother of a child “not more than a month” (173) begging her mother for the baby’s return. The young woman cries, “‘Art thou a mother
and hast no pity on me, a mother? Give me my child!“” (163). Her plea is cut short “by her father's hand upon her mouth” and the threat to have her “bound” and locked away if she does not leave his presence. The father, Samuel Dwining, and the mother are having a conversation on the porch in the shadow of a new wistaria vine the father recently brought over from England. Samuel makes known his plans to return to England the next morning and to marry his daughter to a cousin. When his wife suggests that their daughter will refuse to marry this cousin, “‘a coarse fellow,’” her husband cries, “‘Art thou mad, woman? She weddeth him ere we sail to-morrow, or she stayeth ever in that chamber’” (167). The section ends on this ominous note, and the next section jumps forward in time to the late nineteenth century, when Gilman wrote the story. Jenny, a young wife, spies the old Dwining house and cries to her husband, “‘O, George, what a house! What a lovely house! I am sure it’s haunted! Let us get that house to live in this summer!’” (167). Her husband reluctantly agrees, and two more couples join, “Kate and Jack and Susy and Jim of course” (167). The abandoned house is full of gloomy details, such as “a rickety cradle” and a “cellar without a curb . . . with a rusty chain going down to unknown blackness below” (168). Most prominent is the huge wistaria vine covering the whole front of the house, with a trunk that “rose at the corner of the porch by the high steps, and had once climbed its pillars; but now the pillars were wrenched from their places and held rigid and helpless by the tightly wound and knotted arms” (168). The wistaria adds to the picturesque quality of the quaint colonial home, but in reality it is a ghastly symbol of the home’s brutal legacy.

The couples lose no time imagining tragedies that may have given the house its haunted nature. Jenny is “convinced there is a story, if we could only find it” (168). She
reasons, “‘You need not tell me that a house like this, with a garden like this, and a cellar like this, isn't haunted!’” (168). Jack, in turn, agrees, adding that “‘if we don't find a real ghost, you may be very sure I shall make one. It’s too good an opportunity to lose!’” (168). The difference between Jenny and Jack genders the ghost story’s possibility, with the women convinced the house holds a terrible secret while the men make light of their “fanciful” imaginations. The night, however, is full of revelations, as Jenny is overcome by a ghostly feeling while Jack and George claim to have actually seen a ghost. In Jack’s version of the story, a figure “‘all wrapped up in a shawl’” appears in the middle of the night, holding “‘a big bundle under her arm,’” who “‘glided to a dark old bureau, and seemed taking things from the drawers’” (171). He notes that “‘the moonlight shone full on a little red cross that hung from her neck by a thin gold chain—I saw it glitter as she crept noiselessly from the room!’” (171). Meanwhile, George claims to have seen “‘a woman, hunched up under a shawl! She had hold of the chain [of the cellar well], and the candle shone on her hands—white, thin hands,—on a little red cross that hung from her neck’” (172). The woman disappeared when he “‘spoke to her rather fiercely’” (172). All agree that there must be something in the well worth investigating, so the group descends into the cellar to huddle around “the well so gloomy in its blackness that the ladies recoiled” (172). The men make light of the situation, but things take a somber turn when they discover the corpse of a baby in the bucket at the bottom of the well. At the same time, a group of workers hired to replace the porch’s rotted-out boards gives a startled cry after discovering a second body. “‘They had removed the floor and the side walls of the old porch, so that the sunshine poured down to the dark stones of the cellar bottom. And
there, in the strangling grasp of the roots of the great wistaria, lay the bones of a woman, from whose neck still hung a tiny scarlet cross on a thin chain of gold” (173).

Gary Scharnhorst describes the story “as a type of open-ended riddle” and “an ambiguous, half-told tale disrupted by silences and ellipses” (“Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s” 170). One way to decipher the ambiguous riddle at the heart of “The Giant Wistaria” is to read it within the discourses of local color writing. The character Jack is especially noteworthy, described as “a reporter on a New York daily, and engaged to Mrs. Jenny’s pretty sister” (168). Given his occupation, as Samaine Lockwood explains, Jack “represents modern published writing, the nation, and progressive historical time. The newspaper is concerned with the happenings of today rather than with historical events” (98). As Gloria Biamonte notes, Jack’s compulsion to control the narrative mirrors the actions of Samuel Dwining, as Jack attempts “to place his version of the ghost’s story over an alternative reality he cannot perceive” (37). Lockwood further contends that Gilman’s goal is for current female readers to realize how their situation is all too similar to what women of their station experienced a century ago. “Although the nation tries to forget aspects of its past, the region-as-ghost refuses to let such narratives remain sublimated” (106). Gilman’s story renders the family itself strange by suggesting that the child is born out of the father’s incest (Scharnhorst, “Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s” 160). Indeed, the father wants to marry his daughter to her cousin, “being of the family already” (Gilman 167), putting a new spin on Lovecraft’s theme of the outsider-as-
In Gilman’s case, incest becomes an indictment of what already exists within the family unit, weirding the concept of the frontier family as a civilizing force and undermining that conception by calling into question the morality of the Dwining family, whose history may include murder, rape, and incest.

“The Giant Wistaria” shows the family is the very site of violence, but even more frightening is Gilman’s suggestion that this kind of violence was not merely an eighteenth-century British phenomena but a profoundly nineteenth-century American one. New England is perhaps not as new as it would hope. Instead, New England is haunted by its domestic past, with women the main victims of this haunting. Cynthia Murillo argues that “American women writing during the age of literary realism and whose literature tended toward regionalism and local color found the ghost story an attractive alternative and one that could reassert the self’s autonomy” (755). Gilman invokes the ghost story, but her story also invokes the conditions of writing in the nineteenth century. The men in the story use language in order to confuse and call into question the women’s instincts, making puns and twisting language in order to render the situation comical. As the couples explore the foliage surrounding the house, Susy cries, “Just look at this great wistaria trunk crawling up by the steps here! It looks for all the world like a writhing body—cringing—beseeching!” Her husband Jim replies, “Yes . . . it does, Susy. See its waist,—about two yards of it, and twisted at that! A waste of good material!” At every turn, the men see things very differently from the women. While

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2 This theme is clearly illustrated in “Shadow Over Innsmouth” (1936), in which the nameless narrator initially believes he is an outsider but eventually discovers he is very much a part of the strange New England community of Innsmouth for which he feels such contempt.
Jenny sees “a crouching, hunted figure,” Jack sees “a woman picking huckleberries,” and the volley between Jenny and Jack reiterates their competing narratives (169). Unlike other northeastern writers of the period who “wax nostalgic for colonial New England by representing the region and nation as distinctive—New England as traditional and the home of old American values, the nation as modern and flawed—Gilman implies that New England and the nation are interchangeable when it comes to the condition of white women” (Lockwood 88).

Gilman suggests that the story’s haunted house is actually a way into the past. “Women may begin to historicize gender injustice if they are to take up residence in colonial habitations, for the histories they must learn and the kinships they must feel are not public, but private; not progressive and national, but regressive and regional” (Lockwood 95). Gilman consequently reveals “how cultural movements such as the colonial revival and the emergence of literary modes such as regionalism, both of which allowed for in-depth examinations of New England history, offered many late-nineteenth-century women opportunities to contest dominant, masculinist versions of America’s past” (106). Yet more analysis of Gilman’s choice of a wistaria plant is in order, since it roots the story in a specific place, though the story never actually places itself. One presumes the story is set in New England, but its refusal to name the women from its past also reflects the regional ambiguity that Tuttle and Scharnhorst note about Gilman’s work. Lockwood notes that “the house is distinctively marked by the lush wistaria that publicly expresses the private story of female desire and male violence that underwrites

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3 Although today the common spelling for this plant is “wisteria,” Gilman uses the more appropriate version for her time, “wistaria,” though it has largely fallen out of modern use.
the national narrative” (101). Indeed, as Gilman scholars point out, her work speaks to the struggle for women to gain autonomy within the clutches of patriarchy, but “The Giant Wistaria” also says something about Gilman’s relationship to place.

The wistaria plant was brought over from England by Samuel Dwining as a gift for his wife, and it not only survives and outlives the family, but it also grows to such an extent that it takes over and begins eroding the very foundation of the Dwining house. In the process, the wistaria reveals the hidden secret that confirms Jenny’s belief the house is haunted. Early drafts of the story suggest that Gilman originally titled it “The Ghost Story,” but such a title change perhaps would have narrowed its reception as merely a ghost story (Knight 177). Another explanation for the title might lie in Gilman’s regional aesthetics. The wistaria plant soundly grounds the story in the land, but because this specific plant is commonly found on either coast of the nation-state, it signals the geographical stretch of Gilman’s regionalism.

Tuttle argues that although Gilman is usually associated with New England, “she may be viewed as a nomadic figure who proudly embraced her independence and mobility ‘at large’ and who defies easy categorization by region” (“‘New England” 285). Gilman responded well to California and “inaugurated her career as a professional writer, lecturer, reformer, and activist” (Tuttle and Scarnhorst 15). She showed “her apparent commitment to building a regional literary culture” by working for Charles Lummis’ magazine *Land of Sunshine*, a magazine venue that exemplifies “regionalist writing” (Tuttle, “Gilman’s The Crux” 137) and what Fetterley and Pryse call “local color” (29). Gilman saw the West as a site of freedom for herself and for women like her. As Tuttle and Scharnhorst explain, “beyond its healthy climate and geographic distance from the
oppressive duties of the East (as she described it), the West appealed to Gilman because of its supposed associations with progressive values, the vanguard of women’s suffrage, and new possibilities for social organization” (13-14). In her essay, “Why Nevada Should Win Its Suffrage Campaign in November,” published in Out West in 1914, she reiterated that “the Southern and Eastern states” are “the least progressive of the whole country” and called for “a ‘Solid West’ of courage, liberty, and justice—the land that is not afraid of its women” (73-74). She expands her views in “Woman’s ‘Manifest Destiny’” (1904), which Tuttle describes as a call to “white, New England women to improve the nation’s racial ‘stock’ by migrating West” (“Gilman’s The Crux” 303). Tuttle argues that “California informed and enabled Gilman’s career as an early feminist philosopher,” but this philosophy often left her eugenic and ethnocentric views intact, troubling feminist criticism that does not consider race or place in discussions of Gilman’s work (Tuttle, “‘New England’” 303-304).

Gilman’s love affair with California and the West was not without its tensions. Many Californians openly criticized her personal life. As Gilman explains, “Now here is the difference between east and west. California was afraid of me on account of my ‘views,’ took no account of my work, and damned me because of my personal misfortunes” whereas in the East “my ‘views’ are considered far-seeing and wise, and the personal history does not count at all apparently” (Selected Letters 70–71). Gilman was certainly optimistic about the opportunities the West offered for middle class white women, but “The Giant Wistaria” critiques such blind optimism by conveying a belief that the past still haunts the present. “The Giant Wistaria” is defined by both what is left behind—the Old World, namely, England—and what lies ahead—the western American
frontier and, more specifically, the Golden State where Gilman exerted her female liberation. The story begins with a journey that precedes the narrative, with the father importing the wistaria plant from overseas, making it a western transplant, like Gilman. Interestingly, the wistaria grows on both the East and West coasts of the United States, mirroring Gilman’s relationship to both places but also pointing to her status as an immigrant and outsider in the West who valued the landscape but was contemptuous of the people who lived there. All species of wistarias “contain a saponin called wisterin which is fatal if ingested and may cause dizziness, confusion, speech problems, nausea, vomiting, stomach pains, diarrhea, and collapse” (Lewis 54). The seed pods are especially poisonous, and wistarias are classified as invasive species that disrupt a region’s natural ecosystem. Moreover, it is a “very hardy and fast-growing [and] can grow in fairly poor-quality soils, but prefers fertile, moist, well-drained soil. It thrives in full sun” (54). Indeed, the wistaria plant literally sheds light on the story’s poisonous patriarchy, but it also serves as a metaphor for Gilman’s sense of place.

The scientific classification of the wistaria plant echoes Lockwood’s description: “Reincarnated and rising, it takes over the colonial house, a location that embodies a story of female subjugation at best, of murder at worst. In doing so, the vine ironically attests to the colonial father’s immoral character” (101). Indeed, as Jeffrey Weinstock asserts, “While the women in the second half clearly enjoy freedoms denied to the young woman in the first half, the ghost in the house and the monstrous wistaria vine that holds the body of the young woman in its ‘strangling grasp’ reveal both the legacy of oppression these women have inherited and the extent to which patriarchal culture draws sustenance from and grows out of— both literally and figuratively— the bodies of
women” (178). Gloria Biamonte maintains that “The Giant Wistaria” can also be seen as a didactic text for the way it teaches the reader to truly “read” a ghost story. Math Trafton agrees, stating that the story “reveals a less subtle correspondence between critical readership and haunting in the way that it figures its haunting as a concealed text—that is, as the story of a woman whose history has not been permitted a legitimate place within the greater cultural narrative” (113). The ghost story calls into question the legitimacy of patriarchal historical narratives, warning that women’s stories are often silenced and buried but also promising that they can be dug up, if one pays attention to the ghostly clues left behind.

As Biamonte further notes, “this giant wistaria . . . calls out for a reader, and finds one in another woman a century later,” and maintains that it “begins Gilman’s examination of a female world, not as simply a world inhabited by women and filled with the experiences of their lives, but a world that communicates its stories in its own unique way and needs a receptive and knowing audience to be heard” (36). The women in this story are shown to be the more astute readers, recognizing immediately that there is a haunted history of violence attached to the house. The men, on the other hand, are clearly uncomfortable with this interpretation, since they are “unable to interpret the signs around them” (Biamonte 37). The ghost uncovers the past, creating a story in death, since in life “the young woman’s refusal to participate in a tale not of her own making proves fatal in a world that will not allow her to create her own story, choose her own identity, mother the child she has borne regardless of her society’s sanction of her actions” (36).

But scholars overlook the significant fact that the supernatural entity of the ghost works in tandem with a very natural figure, the wistaria vine. While the ghost reveals the body
in the well, the wistaria exposes the body beneath the house. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that the men and the women respond and interpret the supernatural events very differently. The women, after all, see the “writhing” vine and “a crouching, hunted figure” in the huckleberry bush, a subtle indication of their connection to place and the gendering of Gilman’s regional aesthetic.

Gilman makes clear that in order to uncover the true place of women, one must view women through the lens of the national past and attuned to its whispered voices. The wistaria vine itself undoes the secret of the Dwining home and weirds the frontier myth by reaching back to colonial times and linking the house’s haunted memory to the nineteenth century. What truly haunts the story is not violent patriarchy but the frontier promise of a new beginning. In this way, “The Giant Wistaria” is perhaps best viewed as a “Revisionist ghost story,” following Trafton, who explains, “When a ghost appears in a Revisionist ghost story, it is not to signal the commencement of haunting, but to reveal the essential point that the experience of reality is itself always-already haunted by the profound limitations of human subjectivity and the incomprehensible vastness in the reality beyond” (iii and iv). The horror in these stories, Trafton argues, occurs when characters “realize that the true threat to their traditional assumptions about and experiences of reality are not—and have never been—the result of a supernatural force, but instead, are natural to human experience” (11). Likewise, Wendy Witherspoon contends that the looming threat of contamination in gothic narratives about the West is never realized since “all is already contaminated” (116). The monsters that threaten reality do not take the form of supernatural forces but instead “express communal guilt, suppression of secrets, and the innate violence of society” (116). For Fisher, weird fiction
is weird because it expands our notion of reality and reveals the very terrestrial horrors that society pushes to the margins. The wistaria vine acts as a terrestrial narrative tool for Gilman, an element of the weird that tilts her critique of patriarchal violence toward a regional interpretation.

The “always-already haunted” experience of reality in weird fiction is similar to the “frontier gothic,” which recasts traditional western narratives of conquest and civilization from the perspective of horror or the strange. As James Folsom argues, part of what defines the frontier gothic is the way in which it reveals how “[t]he landscape has proved ultimately—and in this case forebodingly—deceptive” (29). Indeed, it is not so much the ghost in Gilman’s story that lends its gothic tone but the weird wistaria vine that brings the ghostly past to light, quite literally containing the young woman’s body in its clutches. “The ghost in the story, as the interruption of the present by the past, is by definition out of place. She is a violation of the linearity of time and history” (Weinstock 176). The vine in the story, however, is very much in place, to the point of destruction. In this sense, the vine takes its (female) revenge on the (male) home, and the competition for narrative control is a commentary and critique of local color writing. “The Giant Wistaria” colors the story with a frightful account of the past, but it also accounts for Gilman’s troubling regionalism. As Tuttle explains, “her ‘allegiance to California’ was rooted in the state’s natural features and in what the region meant ‘as an ideal’ rather than in a belief that the state should supplant or even rival New England’s prominence on the national scene” (“New England” 301). In the same way, the wistaria adds a dimension of local color that critiques women’s place in the patriarchal home but also avoids issues of race and class that allow for the story and its narrative competition to occur in the first
place. Gilman’s sense of the West divorced people from place, but “The Giant Wistaria” also weirds local color in a way that reveals Gilman’s complicated relationship to place and regionalism.

Gilman was a New Englander who touted the regional superiority of that place in her writings, but Dorothy Scarborough was more rooted in the working conditions of the West Texas frontier. Both women, however, make use of the natural landscape as a way to forge a more critical conception of the frontier myth. All of Scarborough’s major fictional works are set in Texas, and her response to an inquiry about the origins of *The Wind* confirms her rootedness in that place:

You ask for a statement as to how I came to write the book. To begin with, of course, I naturally choose Texas settings and incidents for my stories, since I am a Texan, and a thorough one. I’d match my loyalty against that of anybody in the State. And as our great State offers such varied, unlimited, and almost untouched possibilities for fiction, poetry and the drama, her native sons and daughters would be foolish to look elsewhere for literary inspiration. (Grider vii)

Scarborough’s fictional works are marked by an interest in common people, typically those who are underrepresented in society, which is not surprising, since “she was on the ground floor of folklore scholarship and regional literature in Texas” and served as an early founder and president of the Texas Folklore Society (S. Scarborough 1). Dorothy Scarborough is thus somewhat at odds with Gilman, but they both make use of the natural landscape in a way that weirds the frontier and challenges patriarchal conventions of domesticity while also shoring up the troubling history of race and class in their work.
Born Emily Dorothy Scarborough, near Flora, an abandoned village near Mount Carmel, Texas, in 1878, Scarborough early on defined herself by her interest in writing and academia, in general, as was common in her family. Her father served as a community school-teacher, lawyer, district judge, and later a trustee of Baylor University (Dougan 345). In 1882, the family moved to Sweetwater, Texas, which later served as the setting for *The Wind*. As Scarborough explains, “*The Wind* has its real origin in the impressions I got from hearing my mother’s vivid accounts of her struggles with the climate of the West. She loved the people out there, but she did not care for the weather. My father had taken her there to that high, dry climate, because her lungs were weak. Well, she found the climate dry enough!” (Grider viii). After moving back to Waco in 1887 for the better educational opportunities the town offered, Scarborough distinguished herself in academia, graduating from Baylor University with a Bachelor of Arts in 1896 and a Master’s degree in 1899 with the completion of her thesis on African American folklore (Dougan 345). After graduating, she first headed North to study at the University of Chicago, then across the Atlantic where she studied at Oxford University in England between 1910 and 1911. During this time, Oxford University did not grant women degrees, much to Scarborough’s frustration. After she returned to the United States, she completed her doctorate at Columbia University in New York and later became a lecturer and finally an Associate Professor there in 1931 (345). She remained in New York until her unexpected death in 1935. “Petite and feisty, she tried to blend southern norms and national standards,” as Michael Dougan explains, and “she remained faithful to her religiously conservative Southern Baptist upbringing and made her New York apartment a mecca for southerners,” while at the same time embracing “the liberation of women,
echoing in her novels the triumph of modernization over traditionalism” (346). This blend of southern regionalism and modern womanhood leads Dougan to contend that “her novels show her to be a regionalist with a national perspective” (346).

While Scarborough is undoubtedly a regional writer with a national vision, it is surprising that she is not considered part of the weird fiction tradition, for her literary career overlaps with the “founding father” of weird fiction, H. P. Lovecraft. In her lifetime, Scarborough published two anthologies on ghost stories, most notably, *Famous Modern Ghost Stories* (1921), which included Algernon Blackwood’s “The Willows,” “the finest weird story I have ever read,” according to Lovecraft (“To Vincent Starrett” 24). Scarborough’s anthology also included Arthur Machen’s “The Bowmen” and Robert W. Chambers “The Messenger,” both writers who Lovecraft considered among the most skilled weird fiction writers (26). The 1923 inaugural issue of *Weird Tales*, the magazine that gave rise to weird fiction and published much of Lovecraft’s work, preceded the publication of *The Wind* by just two years. Additionally, G.P. Putnam’s Sons published her dissertation, *The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction*, well before Lovecraft began working on his foundational essay, “The Supernatural Horror in Literature,” which contains a standard definition for weird fiction⁴. It is likely Lovecraft had at one point come into contact with Scarborough’s work, given his scholarly interest in the supernatural, but he unsurprisingly does not acknowledge Scarborough, given his reticence to credit women in general. Biographer S. T. Joshi notes that Lovecraft’s work is “rather embarrassingly reliant” on Edith Birkhead’s *The Tale of Terror* (1921), but he

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⁴ He later published “The Supernatural Horror in Literature” a decade after Scarborough’s *The Supernatural*, published in 1927; he would then revise it in 1933 for serialization in Fantasy Fan.
downplays his indebtedness (16-17). The same might also be said of Scarborough’s dissertation-turned-book, which continues to be hailed as one of the most definitive studies on the subject of the supernatural in literature (Grider xiv).

Some critics, however, have come to recognize Scarborough’s influence on the creation and study of supernatural literature. In “On The Trail of a Pioneer” (1999), Gary Westfahl makes the case for Scarborough as the first academic to write seriously about science fiction. Although Westfahl critiques American literary scholars for their preoccupation with legitimizing the study of science fiction by focusing on canonically sanctioned writers and neglecting a study of its less prestigious origins, he finds Scarborough to be different. As Westfahl puts it, “she approached science fiction from an entirely different background—that of a folklorist” (294). “In her book and elsewhere,” Westfahl explains, “she defends a study of supernatural literature simply on the grounds that such stories are obviously appealing and important to many people, and for that reason merit critical attention” (294). Reading Scarborough alongside Gilman highlights the various ways these women deploy weird elements in their fiction. While the wistaria vine acts as a narrative tool for Gilman, it is also a symbol for Gilman’s complicated relationship to place and regionalism. Meanwhile, the natural world primarily takes the form of the wind in Scarborough’s novel, but the wind takes on a structural if not epistemological role, as well. The wistaria takes over the Dwining house and displays the destructive forces of the patriarchal home—as well as Gilman’s sense of place—but the wind takes over Scarborough’s entire narrative and transforms this otherwise realistic tale into a decidedly weird one.
The Wind tells the story of Letty, a young woman who is recently orphaned and must move from Virginia to West Texas to live with her cousin, Bev. Interestingly, Letty makes the same journey as another famous Virginian made popular by Wister’s 1902 novel. As Scarborough explains, “I didn’t write the book as a deliberate ‘slam’ on West Texas, far from it. I was trying to show the woman’s side of pioneer life, because most of the Western fiction had been about men and their struggles” (Speer 48). Letty cannot adapt to her new home, which proves to be an ugly, harsh, and pitiless place, at least to her mind, and she slowly goes mad, ever tormented by the wind. Scarborough’s editor at Harper and Brothers suggested that the novel be published anonymously, “to arouse the reading public to the point where it will buy The Wind in commercially profitable quantities” (Briggs 1). Although the novel was generally well-received elsewhere, it angered many Texans with its dismal portrayal of the place; local residents read the author’s anonymity as a sign of cowardice and the author’s outsider status. The uproar was so intense that there were reports of alleged public book burnings in Sweetwater by “readers [who] decided the book was anti-Texas propaganda intentionally perpetuated by some wicked Yankee” (Grider vi). Many citizens of West Texas “felt that this portrayal of past living conditions was ‘harmful to the West Texas of today’” (x). One of the novel’s most vocal critics was Sweetwater resident R.C. Crane, president of the West Texas Historical Association, who “accused Scarborough of deliberately distorting the facts to increase sales,” denouncing the book “for what he considered faulty local color, incorrect cowboy lingo, ‘spurious natural history,’ inaccurate terminology, and ‘deplorable ignorance’ of local geography” (x). Scarborough retorted in an anonymous newspaper article that “the book is fiction. Why, bless your historical heart, that’s all it
was ever meant to be!….A novelist writes impressionistically, and fiction need conform only to the essential truth of time and place” (“Second Blow” 6).

For Barbara Quissell, many Texans did not like Scarborough’s novel because its “interpretation of Western life contradicted the persistent optimism in their own attitudes towards the region” (174). After all, Scarborough did not completely fabricate the dismal portrayal of the region. There was not only a severe drought in West Texas between 1886-1887 (S. Scarborough 2), but blizzards also ruined crops and made agricultural life untenable (Buerger 16). “The open pastures were beginning to be fenced in, and the falling of market prices all but wiped out the boom conditions of the Texas cattle industry. The rugged, unrelenting forces of nature threatened the ideal of the American frontier” (Buerger 16). As a result of this environmental devastation and economic collapse, many simply “could not accept her portrayal of defeat, a defeat that was unjustified and unearned” (Quissell 175). *In the Land of Cotton* (1923), a novel Scarborough published two years prior to *The Wind*, she exhibits her interest in the lives of ordinary folk. Mary Thompson Speer explains that the novel is “in effect a plea for the relief of the tenant farmer, caught between a grasping landlord and usurious merchant, and held captive by both to one crop, cotton” (45-46). This interest in the personal lives of everyday folk is something that Jean Fair sees as common amongst Texas women writers, who “developed as radically different from their male counterparts. Instead of focusing on high times and heroism, women writers focused more on the human problems of personal relationships and maintaining stability in times of crisis” (48-49). Indeed, *The Wind* focuses on the interior life of a young woman and strongly challenges idealistic conceptions of the mythic West.
Incidentally, Scarborough’s interest in the common folk of Texas stands in contrast to Lovecraft’s interest in the cosmos and Gilman’s interest in the exotic features of regional landscapes. As Lovecraft explains, “I could not write about ‘ordinary people’ because I am not in the least interested in them. Without interest there can be no art. Man’s relations to man do not captivate my fancy. It is man’s relation to the cosmos—to the unknown—which alone arouses in me the spark of creative imagination. The humanocentric pose is impossible to me, for I cannot acquire the primitive myopia which magnifies the earth and ignores the background” (In Defense of Dagon 21). Lovecraft sets his sights on the cosmos while Scarborough’s fiction stays grounded in the common folk. Westfahl notes that Scarborough was one of the first critics to engage with the idea of “intimate” science fiction, which concerns only a small number of people, rather than fiction concerned with large-scale or even global events (297). In her doctoral thesis, The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction, Scarborough writes, “We should feel a keen loss in our fiction if all the vague elements of the supernatural were effaced” (226). Scarborough’s attention to “the vague elements” highlights the enduring popularity of her work and lends itself to her firm commitment to portraying West Texas accurately, but the supernatural is not out of place in her representation of the place. In The Wind, Scarborough creates a unique aesthetic blend, weirding the genres of realism and naturalism through her unapologetic use of the supernatural, but it is her attention to the natural landscape that adds a weird element to her sense of regionalism. Quissell observes that Scarborough “molded all her carefully researched details on the region’s history and landscapes, its local speech patterns and customs, to fit her heroine’s struggle and defeat”
The Wind illustrates Scarborough’s attention to character and landscape through the troubling consciousness of its main protagonist.

The Wind begins with Letty’s journey from her Virginia home to that of her beloved cousin Bev, who lives in Sweetwater, Texas. On the train, she meets a wealthy Texas rancher named Wirt Roddy, who could be her knight-in-shining armor, except for the fact that he takes sadistic pleasure in crushing Letty’s fantasy of Sweetwater as an idyllic place. Letty is already troubled by her life’s predicament, having just lost her mother and the family’s southern homestead, and Wirt emphasizes the harshness of West Texas, especially toward women. He explains that the wind causes “‘ruination to a woman’s looks and nerves pretty often. It dries up her skin till it gets brown and tough as leather. It near ‘bout puts her eyes out with the sand it blows in ‘em all day. It gets on her nerves with its constant blowing—makes her irritable and jumpy’” (The Wind 21). Wirt’s genteel southern concern with women’s looks belies the fact that a woman’s appearance also serves as markers for class and race. The description of a white woman’s skin becoming “brown and tough as leather” reveals an anxiety about race in West Texas that is largely environmental. After all, if a woman’s skin is no longer white, she becomes like a racial other. Wirt’s warning recalls Scaborough’s description of Pedro, a Mexican man who lives and works on Lige’s property, “A wizen-faced, brown old man whose countenance had the color of metal left out in rain and sun till it has a patina over it” (99). Pedro is directly connected to the land, not only through his appearance but through his deep knowledge of place. “‘He’s a great prophecier about weather,’” the cowboy Lige explains. “‘Everything’s a sign of rain or a drought or a norther, to hear him tell it’” (99). Letty is fond of Pedro and “felt for him something of the same affectionate familiarity
she had felt for the darkeys at home in Virginia. He was simple and childlike of heart, and yet wise, because he was old” (191). Letty ignorantly displaces her romantic regional view of the South onto the racial dynamic of the West. Rather than leave such a racial confusion unchallenged, Scarborough instead critiques Letty’s romantic conceptions of place, which are rooted in the South and often found in local color writing. Instead, *The Wind* advocates for a regionalism that is attuned to difference and the environmental particularities of place.

Typically, narratives about the West render nature a universal signifier of freedom for white men, but Scarborough demonstrates how race, class, and the environment are intertwined. By extension, as an environmental concept, Scarborough shows how unstable the categories of race and class can be, especially in the West Texas borderlands. As Renée Berglund argues, the narrative of “disappeared” indigenous peoples is a central part of the western genre:

Guilt over the dispossession of Indians and fear of their departed spirits sometimes function as perverse sources of pleasure and pride for white Americans because they signify a successful appropriation of the American spirit. In Europe, people were haunted by their own ancestors. In America, they have the opportunity to be haunted by the ghosts of Indians. (19)

Scarborough invokes the “ghostly pleasure” of the “vanishing Indian,” but the novel does not allow it to remain unexamined. As Jean Fair observes, “In typical Gothic American literature, the arrival of white settlers is understood to doom the American Indian, who is typically relegated to the distant past” (57). *The Wind*, however, as Fair notes, “provides a
critique of the nation’s expansionist ideologies instead of simply replicating these conventional uses of the Indian” (57).

Letty fixates on her cousin Bev, but his wife Cora is possessive and quickly squashes Letty’s fantasy and comfort in her cousin. Cora is the ultimate “helpmate” who embodies the image of “the frontier woman who was able to shoot nearly as straight as her husband, remain calm in an Indian attack, and handle with equanimity the myriad chores of a rural household was a figure well-established” (Inness 25-6). In order to escape the monotony and harshness Letty experiences in her cousin’s home, she marries Lige, a sweet and simple cowboy with a propensity for telling tall tales. Letty is wracked with guilt that she has married out of desperation instead of love, and she slowly goes mad in her new home due to its isolation and the unrelenting drought. Not only that, but the incessant wind becomes a torturous character in and of itself, much like Wirt Roddy, and it eventually takes over the narrative. The main action of the text occurs within the last twenty pages of the novel, which seems to take on the form of the wind, slowly wearing down the reader until Letty’s end seems like a foregone conclusion, its sudden force stunning the reader. The wind, in other words, is not confined to a mere plot device but becomes more human in an almost supernatural transformation. Letty’s discontent and dissociation culminates with a dramatic fight with Lige, who rides away from their home, leaving Letty to face a vicious windstorm alone. Wirt Roddy arrives to “rescue” Letty, who finally succumbs to his sexual advances, although the novel does not make it clear whether this is consensual or not. In the morning, once the storm has passed, Wirt threatens to reveal her betrayal to Lige. In a fit of desperation, Letty shoots Wirt dead and in a panic buries his body in a sand drift. However, his body refuses to stay hidden, as her
old enemy the wind continuously uncovers the body, at last breaking Letty’s sanity and causing her to run screaming into the swirling sand and desert.

One reason for Letty’s tragic end is perhaps her failure to reconcile the differences between the American South and the Southwest. Scarborough weirds the western landscape in part through Letty’s romantic notions of her home in the South. Letty constantly compares West Texas to Virginia, painting the latter as an idyllic paradise. Numbmed by the wind and isolation of the West Texas plains, Letty “lives a divided life, one of the body—there on the prairie desert in the drought—the other of the spirit where she was back at home in the country in Virginia” (The Wind 242). As Susan Kollin argues, Letty is self-aware enough to recognize “the real causes of her predicament, which stem less from some metaphysical force of nature than from ideologies that shape the social position and power of white, middle-class women” (689).

Following Sherrie Inness, “It is not the West that vanquishes Letty, but a society that confines her to her unchosen role as a pioneer wife” (37). Indeed, “American culture in the nineteenth century had spawned a woman who could not survive in the new worlds that were open to her” (S. Scarborough 3). In defense of the novel, Scarborough assured her audience, “‘Now that the country is built up, civilization would offer any Letty many ways of escape. Only the savage isolation of the past would offer a situation where she would have no defenses’” (qtd. in Lobdell 1). Although Scarborough may be overstating the benefits women have received from modern “civilization,” her focus on place and time is critical. While the West is male-dominated and unforgiving to Letty, the South represents a haven for female companionship, but this haven is built on the backs and the memory of slave labor, as Letty remembers her old “mammy” just as fondly as she
remembers her mother. In the West, however, she cannot connect to the frontier woman, making the male-dominated landscape so pervasive that it takes the form of the wind itself—invisible yet directly shaping the land and Letty’s life.

While Letty’s journey strengthens her belief that the South and the West are nothing alike, Scarborough critiques this assumption, positing instead that there is no definitive break by “questioning whether traveling to the West will ultimately lead to an expansion of horizons, as many Western novels have assumed” (Inness 36). On her way to Bev’s home after her arrival in Sweetwater, Lige tells Letty about “‘old Fort Phantom Hill, where Robert E. Lee had made a stand against the Indians in the days before the Civil War—of the old, ruined structure that might yet be seen, its chimneys standing ghost-like in the gloom’” (60-61). Lige muses, “‘Some folks say that at night the ghosts of the soldiers under Lee come back, and the Injun ghosts are there, too. But I ain’t never seen ‘em’” (61). Although Lige dismisses this legend as mere superstition, his comments reveal the very real history haunting the South and Southwest. Lige reveals more of these ghost stories as he proudly describes the white conquest of the West:

He pictured how the Indians used to shoot them [the buffalo] with their bows and arrows, or sometimes, when other means failed, they would drive herds of them over a precipice…. He told her of the Indians that had formerly ranged on western plains, wild and free as the buffaloes—the Comanches, the Apaches, and the Kiowas—and described their battles, their marauding expeditions, when they would swoop down on some lone settler’s ranch, fire his house, kill the family, perhaps, drive off the cattle
and horses, and escape to the trackless plains where the white man could scarcely find them. (58)

Lige’s focus on the land is significant: the vivid action he describes only serves to emphasize the haunting absence that dominates the now seemingly empty landscape. This haunted history of the West also comes up when Lige tells the story of Cynthia Ann Parker, “a legend that exemplifies the isolation and powerlessness of women in the West, and serves as a foreshadowing of Letty’s fate” (S. Scarborough 7). Lige explains that Parker’s life was characterized by a “‘despair [which] came twice’” (The Wind 58). In 1836, Parker was kidnapped at the age of ten by a band of Comanches. Although Lige describes her as having “‘all but died of homesickness’” (58), she later adapted to her new life and raised a family with Chief Peta Nocona. In December of 1860, the Texas Rangers attacked the band and discovered that she was a white woman, so they abducted Parker and her baby girl. Lige explains to Letty that Parker “‘tried every way to get away from them, as if she was as anxious then to be an Injun as she must ‘a’ been to get back to her home when the redskins first took her’” (59). This was a futile effort, as Lige explains, since “‘the tribe was scattered and her man killed, so she just set and mourned, with a look on her face fir to make a stone cry, folks said… She never did get reconciled’” (60). Stories such as Parker’s disrupt conventional western narratives that obscure or celebrate frontier violence⁵. Both Letty and Parker are wrenched away

⁵ Parker’s story also inspired Alan Le May’s 1954 novel The Searchers, which in turn served as the basis for John Ford’s 1956 film version starring John Wayne. This film, which is consistently considered one of the foremost westerns of all time, follows former Confederate soldier and Franco-Mexican War veteran Ethan Edwards on his search for his niece, who was abducted by Comanche scouts.
from their family homes, and Letty realizes that “[t]o be homesick for a home you didn’t have any more, was the worst hurt in the world!” (33). Unlike Parker, however, Letty never adapts. Instead, she stubbornly resists the Texas way of life by personifying and vilifying the land. Ultimately, she is taken by the wind, a natural force that serves as the vehicle through which Scarborough renders her critique of the masculine violence of the West, as well as Letty’s regional nostalgia.

The cowboys Lige and Sourdough reinforce the portrayal of the wind as a particularly masculine force when they compare it to a wild stallion that haunts the West Texas plains. Lige describes these creatures in supernatural terms, explaining:

> They say some of these stallions weren’t just flesh and blood, weren’t living horses, but something that did not die,” he went on musingly.

> “Spirits, you might say they were; maybe devils. You’ll often hear of a pacing white stallion that couldn’t never be taken, that laughed at your lasso. They’ll tell you of a big black horse that no man living could come near to. You could see him racing over the prairies, when dusk began to come, going as fast as the wind…. If you see him you can know him, because his hoofs are like fire, they say, and his mane and tail stream in the wind, and he neighs at night, as he goes like the norther when it sweeps over the plain. (The Wind 154)

While the figure of the stallion is typically seen as “a defiant love of freedom and unspoiled American wilderness,” Scarborough alters these “masculine Western images to

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Significantly, Scarborough’s novel and the film adaption of it precedes The Searchers, suggesting an alternatively weird and more critical interpretation of the Parker story.
create negatively realistic emotions rather than positive, romantic ones” (S. Scarborough 5).

Letty rides into Sweetwater aboard a train the tracks of which are littered with dead cows, which marks the West as “a land of indifference and cruelty, a land of action without the ethical examination of consequences” (Quissell 182). Letty thinks to herself, “All the old values seemed left behind. Ahead lay the path to the West, with its trail of broken bodies” (The Wind 32). The name of the town itself, Sweetwater, creates an ironic and even horrific sense of place for Letty, since there is no water and nothing sweet in Sweetwater, Texas. In the introduction to Famous Modern Ghost Stories (1921), Scarborough notes that seeing ghosts in unexpected places can increase their effectiveness in fiction. “One effect of setting ghost stories in desert sand wastes and similar places, such realistic and unspectral, is to give a greater verisimilitude to the events. And a good ghost story, as much as possible, should unite objects as they are in life, with a preternatural spirit” (Supernatural 105). James Folsom argues that the landscape of the American West, although not typically associated with horror, nevertheless can prove “forebodingly… deceptive” by changing the “safety originally promised by the empty landscape into a revelation of hidden perils” (29). Scarborough depicts the wind as “lying in wait to torment its victims, a wind that was as knowing and as cruel as a devil or a maniac!” (The Wind 105-6). The wind reacts violently against white-settler invaders, acting an avenging spirit, to a certain extent, that disrupts pioneer settlement. This entails a particularly gendered violence since women were all-too often visible symbols of that civilization. Scarborough’s depiction also calls into question “the conventional gendering of landscape as female” (Kollin 688). Since the wind is clearly
gendered as male, Scarborough “reverses gender roles of the male protagonist and female landscape typically portrayed in the American novel, instead presenting a landscape where the violent, masculine forces of nature resist the feminine impulses toward settlement” (Fair 62).

Scarborough’s use of the wind not only anticipates Lovecraft’s definition of the weird, but it also weirds the western genre by inverting gendered notions of freedom. Instead of providing a place of solace and rejuvenation, the land becomes a vengeful devil in Letty’s mind, capable of enacting severe punishment. The novel’s opening lines begin as if they are the start of an old legend told around a campfire, intoning that:

In the old days, the winds were the enemies of women. Did they hate [the women] because they saw in them the symbols of that civilization which might gradually lessen their own power? Because it was for women that men would build houses as once they made dugouts?—would increase their herds, would turn the unfenced pastures into farms, furrowing the land that had never known touch of plough since time began?—stealing the sand from the winds? (The Wind 3)

As her sanity begins to unravel, Letty justifies Wirt’s murder by reasoning that he died “because he had put the fear of the wind in her soul… The wind had been listening, and had punished him for his blasphemy” (332). Moreover, she thinks, “Why struggle against a force that was a devil, and all powerful? She had known all along that the wind would get her!” (336). In the novel’s final moments, the narrative perspective shifts to take on the persona of the wind. As Letty loses her sense of selfhood, she merely becomes “the woman” (337). She is absorbed by the land she so feared, fleeing “across the prairies like
a leaf blown in a gale,” giving over to the wind, which “was at last to have its way with her” (337). The ending provides no resolution, like in Gilman’s story, where women in the past bear no name and the reader is haunted by the blank page.

Letty is haunted by the wind, which becomes like a “demon lover,” but she is equally haunted by the seemingly idyllic southern life she leaves behind. The novel suggests a more critical perspective of Letty and her romantic regionalism, which cannot adapt to the racial or environmental landscape of West Texas. “In this way,” as Carole Slade notes, “Scarborough offers a bleak parody of the Western hero’s adaptation to his harsh environment through emulation” (115). Instead of painting a heroic picture of pioneering Anglo men and women, Scarborough shows how the past continues to haunt and violate the present. Like the wind, this violence will not go easily. Scarborough suggests that humans have made the western frontier a haunted place by their irresponsible actions: rather than winning the west, in many ways, they contributed to its destruction and demise.

The destruction and demise of the West especially comes home, so to speak, with the haunting image of “curtains of sand” at the end, which reveal and obscure Wirt’s dead body (337). Like the wistaria vine in “The Giant Wistaria,” the wind unearths Letty’s secret, but rather than reveal the death of an unnamed woman and her child, Scarborough turns the patriarchal narrative of violence and exacts revenge on Wirt and Letty, together. Letty’s mind warps the wind and nature itself so that it takes on a dominating male persona that seeks to absorb Letty once and for all, not unlike Samuel Dwining in “The Giant Wistaria.” Gilman deploys the vine in order to render her critique of New England patriarchy and her skepticism of the frontier promise of societal change, while
Scarborough personifies the wind to critique the kind of local color writing that subscribes to romantic notions of place. In both cases, what appears to be supernatural is actually incredibly natural, weirded in order to demonstrate how our preconceived notions of frontier life are usually defined by fantasy and not reality. The true horror is not in the ghosts from the past but the bodies in the present that dredge up the haunting history of violence. Indeed, whether in New England, the South, or the West, the past never truly passes. Like Wirt Roddy’s body, what is hidden will eventually come to the surface.
Chapter Two
Ishmael Reed and the African American Weird Western

Recent scholarship on Ishmael Reed’s *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969) views his use of the Western genre as a trickster trope or Neo-HooDoo charm, a parody that reveals the racist and Eurocentric dogma the Western genre often embodies and inspires. Reed is a central figure in the Black Arts movement and African American fiction of the West, yet his use of supernatural and science fiction elements set him apart from the Black Arts movement, leading critics such as Paul Green to categorize *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* as a weird western (273). For other critics, what sets the novel apart from traditional westerns is that Reed’s protagonist, the Loop Garoo Kid, is a Black cowboy and hoodoo priest. For them, an African American in a western is weird enough to make it a generic anomaly. This critical response to African Americans in narratives about the Old West is typical, and the film *Django Unchained* (2012) is no different. Critics widely approved and hailed it as an innovative and daring film that successfully combined disparate genres. Even director Quentin Tarantino, known for his vast cinematic knowledge, claimed to *The New York Times* that his film constructed a “new, virgin-snow kind of genre” (3). As critic Michael K. Johnson argues, however, “early reviews of *[Django]* suggest a too ready willingness to attribute to a white screenwriter and director a generic innovation that African American writers and filmmakers have been creatively inventing and reinventing for centuries” (*Hoo-Doo Cowboys* 239). Reed’s novel, for instance, employs elements of the Weird West even while he revises them in order to critique exclusionary western narratives that write out (and white out) the experiences of African Americans.
This chapter explores the complicated intersections of race, class, and gender that exclude Black men from attaining power and that open up the western frontier to new forms of racial expression. While other scholars have examined how Reed uses race in order to critique the Western, few have explored how sexuality plays a part in this critique. By putting *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* into conversation with Robert E. Howard’s short story “Black Canaan” (1936), this chapter reveals how these authors engage with issues of race and gender through alternative dimensions that call into question accepted narratives about the West. Comparing Howard’s short story to *Yellow Back Radio* demonstrates how Reed responds to the racism in weird fiction. The hero in Howard’s tale is a white cowboy named Kirby Buckner, who quells a rumored uprising of the Black citizens of Grimesville, Louisiana, supposedly under the spell of the evil African conjure man, Saul Stark. The white protagonist must contend with a nameless Black woman whose sexuality challenges Buckner’s identity as a white man. In Reed’s novel, however, the Black conjure man and hero-cowboy are one in the same. Instead of bringing order, the Loop Garoo Kid’s goal is to shake up the status quo. Reed’s novel and Howard’s short story seem to differ in almost every way possible. However, while Reed portrays Loop’s sexuality as empowering, it is often at the expense of women and gay men, similar to Howard’s work. Putting Reed and Howard into conversation thus evinces a much deeper critique of Reed’s novel and its homosexual tropes of alterity and pathological difference.

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Ishmael Reed has long been a controversial figure in American literature. Born in Chattanooga, Tennessee, in 1938, Reed’s family joined others in what is now known as the Great Migration and moved to Buffalo, New York, where he attended the University of Buffalo for three years. Due to financial difficulties and coupled with his lack of enthusiasm for what he saw as a stifled, one-sided education, Reed left the university and briefly worked as a cohost at a local radio station, before his show was cancelled due to complaints about his decision to air an interview with Malcolm X (Fox 345). Reed found a more successful occupation as a correspondent for a community-run Black newspaper called the Empire Star Weekly, predating his later involvement in the influential underground East Village Other in New York City, where he relocated in 1962. During this time, he joined a group of artists who together formed the Umbra Writers Workshop, whose interest in the identification and creation of a Black Aesthetic led to the Black Arts movement, about which Reed has since expressed ambivalence (Conversations 247).

Following the publication of his first novel, The Freelance Pallbearers (1967), Reed went on to teach at the University of California at Berkeley, where he was famously denied tenure in 1977, followed by several visiting scholar posts at Harvard, Yale, and Dartmouth. In some ways, his denial of tenure led to his prolific publications, most significantly, his novel Mumbo Jumbo (1972) and several poetry books, including Conjure (1972), as well as his nomination for a Pulitzer Prize. Add to this literary oeuvre his essay collections, plays, television productions, and musical arrangements, not to mention his critical and editorial work (Fox 624). In 1976, he founded the Before Columbus Foundation, “dedicated to the promotion and dissemination of contemporary
American multicultural literature” (“About” 1). Reed continues to write and to serve as a political activist raising awareness about race in American literature and culture.

*Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* focuses on the Loop Garoo Kid, a Black cowboy, hoodoo priest, and the eldest son of God who was banished from heaven by a jealous Christ. Loop has since joined a circus troupe invited to the town of Yellow Back Radio. However, the troupe is ambushed by a group of cowboys sent by Drag Gibson, a rich racist landowner who controls Yellow Back Radio through intimidation, trickery, and murder. Loop is the only one to make it out alive; he flees to the mountain caves that surround Yellow Back Radio, where he plots his revenge against Drag and the other town officials. Along the way, he encounters absurd characters, like Bo Shmo and his neo-social realist gang; the “last Indian” of Yellow Back Radio named Chief Showcase; and Mustache Sal, a treacherous former love interest who bears the marks of being branded by Loop. The hoodoo hero ultimately kills Drag, frees the town, and seems to return home to Heaven after Pope Innocent VIII comes to beg his forgiveness. By twisting and turning the typical cast of Western characters, Reed weirds the West in a way that also critiques the conventions of gender and genre but conforms to dominant, heterosexual stereotypes of homosexuality and deviance.

Reed deliberately engages with the literary history of weird fiction in *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* while simultaneously incorporating Black literature of the West. As Reed explains, “I based the book on old radio scripts in which the listener constructed the sets with his imagination; that’s why ‘radio’; also because it’s an oral book, a talking book.” He continues, “Also ‘radio’ because there’s more dialogue than scenery or description. ‘Yellow Back’ because that’s what they used to call Old West books about
cowboy heroes: they were ‘yellow covered books and were usually lurid and sensational’

. . . . Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down is the dismantling of a genre done in an oral way like Radio” (Conversations 63). Contrary to early reviews that claimed that Reed must have been under the influence while writing this novel, Reed asserts, “I wasn’t ‘crazy’ or ‘on dope,’ but extremely conscious of form when I wrote that book” (64). While Reed emphasizes the innovation that Black writers bring to the western genre, he also acknowledges his predecessors by invoking Nat Love, a Black cowboy who wrote about his participation in the West. Likewise, Loop offers an alternative way of thinking about the American West and speaks to the historical presence of Black cowboys. As Artur Jaupaj explains, the “novel revises Turner’s thesis by marking a glorious return of the marginalized races” (45). Stephen McVeigh notes that Reed uses the novel “in the first place to highlight African-Americans’ traditional exclusion from this American narrative and subsequently works to dismantle it” (149). Reed’s characters are familiar to an audience raised on Westerns, even while these characters embody the sign of Black writers. His novel may seem senseless, but that is part of his point: “So this is what we want: to sabotage history. They won’t know whether we’re serious or whether we are writing fiction” (Conversations 37). In the process, Reed weirds the western genre and the place of blackness in the West through his depiction of gender and sexuality that critiques and challenges traditional (and nontraditional) western figures.

In many ways, Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down embodies Reed’s artistic philosophy, which he calls Neo-HooDoo. As Robert Elliot Fox argues, this philosophy is “in many ways, a truly ‘black’ art,” yet at the same time, “due to the undeniable mix of ingredients in the New World, it is also ‘something else’” (345). Fox furthers notes,
“Unlike those who argue for a black essentialism, Reed sees this hybridity as a virtue, rather than a defect or betrayal” (345). The term hoodoo not only refers to the Americanization of the voodoo religion that originated in Haiti, “a polygot faith which embraces syncretism and challenges the notion of bounded essences” (Tietichen 332), but also to the rock formation found in the West’s most iconic settings. These geological wonders include the Badlands of the Northern Great Plains, the Four Corners region, and most spectacularly in Bryce National Park and Arches National Park in Utah. In the first few pages of the novel, Reed establishes this parallel when introducing Zozo Labrique, a “charter member of the American Hoo-Doo Church” (10). Only a few pages later in a description of the location where a scout for the circus troupe was lynched, the narrator notes a nearby “hoodoo rock” on top of which “fat nasty buzzards were arriving” (14). According to the U.S. Department of the Interior, this specific rock formation is characterized as “tall skinny spires of rock that protrude from the bottom of arid basins and ‘broken’ lands” and are “often described as having a ‘totem pole-shaped body’” (United States 1). Through weathering, the softer rock is eroded away, leaving the hard rock in precarious positions that appear to defy logic. Hoodoo formations seem poised to collapse at any moment, yet through a delicate balance retain their form. This image demonstrates the connection between the western genre and the African American West, one that has been whittled away through white historical erasure, but this paradoxical balance is also an apt symbol for the novel itself. Reed walks a fine line between absurdist humor and critique, and he weirds the western space to connect two seemingly disparate traditions, revealing that geography and race were never fixed but always malleable.
As Ralph Ellison states, Black Americans have known all too well “the relationship between geography and freedom” (*Going to the Territory* 131). Todd Tietchen argues that, “Reed’s HooDoo West often loses all coherent boundaries, placing it in stark contrast to the mythic frontier, site of an unambiguous conversion mission which pitted forces of Christian light against forces of Satanic darkness” (339). Yet other critics argue that the landscape of the West, which is often defined as being open and empty, is actually dangerously “deceptive” (Folsom 31). At one point in the text, Drag Gibson, stymied once again by the Loop Garoo Kid, exclaims “HOW CAN HE BE IN TWO PLACES AT ONE TIME?” (83). This bewildered cry brings us to what Michael K. Johnson calls “the debate circling around whether we should regard the frontier as an actual and identifiable geographic region or whether we should examine the frontier experience as a process of change and transformation” (*Black Masculinity* 10). It also links back to Reed’s idea of Neo-HooDoo, specifically of “time sense,” which is “akin to the ‘time’ one finds in the psychic world where past, present and future exist simultaneously” (*Conversations* 63-64). In short, Reed explains, “voodoo says that the past is contemporary” (139). Drag’s question could also be posed to the novel’s setting: how can a place be two things at one time? This question can be complicated even further since Reed never provides a definitive time frame, as McVeigh observes, “The novel ranges from the eighteenth century to the present, combing historical events and cowboy myths with modern technology and cultural debris” (150). Reed puts these differing time periods into conversation and bends the reader’s perception of causality.

Reed’s artistic philosophy becomes especially apparent in a comparative discussion of Howard’s “Black Canaan.” Although “Black Canaan” is by no means the
only weird tale that contains questionable racial ideology, it illustrates the type of attitudes Reed was up against as he wrote his Weird Western, especially with regard to conjure, the history of slave rebellions, and white fears of Black sexuality. Howard published “Black Canaan” in the June 1936 issue of *Weird Tales*, a story that follows Buckner, who was born in “that isolated back-country, called Canaan, that lies between Tularoosa and Black River” (Howard 379). Buckner returns home after he receives the warning, “‘Trouble on Tularoosa Creek!’” in the form of “a whisper from the withered lips of a shuffling black crone” (379). Such a warning, the narrator states, is all too clear: “It could have but one meaning—old hates seething again in the jungle-deeps of the swamplands, dark shadows slipping through the cypress, and massacre stalking out of the black, mysterious village that broods on the moss-festooned shore of sullen Tularoosa” (379). This predicted uprising mirrors past slave revolts in Canaan’s history. As Buckner remembers, “The blacks had risen in 1845, and the red terror of that revolt was not forgotten, nor the three lesser rebellions before it, when the slaves rose and spread fire and slaughter from Tularoosa to the shores of Black River. The fear of a Black uprising lurked for ever in the depths of that forgotten back-country; the very children absorbed it in their cradles” (384).

Howard hints that the racial tension plaguing Canaan is not isolated to the Deep South but is fundamental to the U.S. as a whole. He relates that, “In Canaan lived the sons and daughters of the white frontiersmen who first settled the country, and the sons and daughters of their slaves” (380). The memory marks the community as a frontier and a slave space, but Howard’s story also speaks to contemporary white anxieties over “race riots,” such as one that took place in Harlem between Black citizens and white police
officers in March 1935, one year prior to the publication of his story. The riot was the first to occur in New York City in the twentieth century. As Malcolm McLaughlin explains, “a rumor that a teenage boy had been severely beaten by the police after allegedly stealing a knife from a store, sparked a rampage in March 1935” (14). Described by Ralph Ellison’s protagonist in *Invisible Man* (1952), “They came toward me as I ran, a crowd of men and women carrying cases of beer, cheese, chains of linked sausage, watermelons, sacks of sugar, hams, cornmeal, fuel lamps. If only it could stop right here, here; here before the others came with their guns. I ran” (555). But the police did come with their guns: “One boy who was running was shot and killed without warning” (Greenberg 5). Once the dust settled, “Fifty-seven civilians and seven policemen were injured, and 626 windows broken” in addition to “seventy-five people, mostly black, had been arrested” (4). Such episodes of violence also haunt *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, especially “the long, hot summer of 1967,” which McLauglin describes as “the blistering height of an urban revolt that had begun in 1964 and which would forever change America’s understanding of what was often called ‘the race problem’” (1). Based on “rumors of conspiracy and impending black uprising [that] swirled through communities, black and white” (84), these violent clashes between African Americans and police officers shifted the government’s gaze from the South to the North and West, areas the federal government had assumed were largely unaffected by contemporary civil rights movements. However, such eruptions of violence were no surprise to those who lived in these communities.

Rather than spontaneous bursts of violence, Cheryl Greenberg argues that race riots were “as much of a political act as were organized protests and campaigns” (6).
Episodes of police brutality towards Black men generate “shock” reactions in the mainstream media, but they are not isolated incidents. Contemporary forms of police brutality stem from a long history of violence predicated on white supremacy and sexual deviance, histories which Howard and Reed refer to for vastly different reasons but that betray anxieties over Black women’s sexuality. In “Black Canaan,” Buckner feels that he can avoid such racial violence and rushes home, only to be set upon by a beautiful Black woman. He narrates:

a strange turmoil of conflicting emotions stirred in me. I had never before paid any attention to a black or brown woman. But this quadroon girl was different from any I had ever seen. Her features were regular as a white woman’s, and her speech was not that of a common wench. Yet she was barbaric, in the open lure of her smile, in the gleam of her eyes, in the shameless posturing of her voluptuous body. Every gesture, every motion she made set her apart from the ordinary run of women; her beauty was untamed and lawless, meant to madden rather than to soothe, to make a man blind and dizzy, to rouse in him all the unreined passions that are his heritage from his ape ancestors. (381)

This nameless female presence causes a personal “turmoil” in Buckner: he is anxious because she defies his racial (and racist) expectations, but he also feels a sexual attraction for her.

Buckner is also struck by the nameless “quadroon girl” and her potent use of language, which links her sexuality to her conjure abilities. Buckner finds the woman dangerous because she has a command of both supernatural and sexual powers, which
reveals his own inadequacy. This attraction forces Buckner to question his place in society by challenging his very humanity while also destabilizing his identity as a cowboy and as a man. The woman renders him impotent in a way that strikes at cowboy lore. Buckner exclaims that when he attempts to murder her, “I sat there like an image pointing a pistol I could not fire!” (381). This combination of sexuality and subordination in turn inverts the long history of sexual violence of white men against Black women, both during and post-plantation slavery. The woman herself recalls this, “‘Black men are fools, all but Saul Stark,’” she laughed. “‘White men are fools, too. I am the daughter of a white man, who lived in the hut of a black king and mated with his daughters. I know the strength of white men, and their weakness’” (382). The defiant Black woman embodies sexual deviance and Black freedom, a double threat to Buckner and the white community of Canaan. Although she also displays her knowledge of conjure magic, her real power resides in her ability to challenge Buckner’s racial and gender superiority.

While Buckner has very little actual confrontation with Saul Stark, Howard spends a great deal of narrative space describing Buckner’s confrontation with this unnamed woman. Indeed, the conjure man is almost rendered insignificant by their anticlimactic final showdown that results in Saul’s death. This murder seems meant to restore Buckner’s sense of masculinity and white superiority, but this reassurance is undercut by the haunting effect of his encounter with the nameless Black woman, which literally renders him speechless. As Buckner explains, “I could no more speak of her than I could pull the trigger of the pistol aimed at her. And I cannot describe the horror that beset me when I realized this. The conjer [sic] spells the black men feared were not lies, I realized sickly; demons in human form did exist who were able to enslave men’s will and
thoughts” (396). Conjure frightens Buckner. By extension, the mixed-blood Black woman reveals the weakness of white men and threatens to transform them into inarticulate slaves. This fear of sexual silence forms part of what Reed points out as an essential element of conjure: the power over words. As he writes in “Neo-HooDoo Manifesto,” which appeared in his poetry collection _Conjure_ (1972), “Neo-HooDoo believes that every man is an artist and every artist/ a priest,” a clear indication of how Reed views his role as a writer (21). The white men of Yellow Back Radio report to Drag Gibson that the Loop Garoo Kid has retreated to his hideout to write poems, or as he calls them, “curses” (60). As Todd Tietchen observes, the very text of _Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down_ serves as Reed’s own wangol, or hoodoo spell (328).

Reed’s role as a writer/priest alerts us to the complicated relationship the novel has with gender and sexuality. After all, Loop is, “A bullwhacker so unfeeling he left the print of winged mice on hides of crawling women” (_Yellow Back_ 9). Indeed, the violence against women in the novel is most in keeping with the normative Western tradition. Loop is no exception. One of Loop’s sexual proclivities is to brand women, a troubling image since it again brings to mind the horrors of slavery. Loop brands Mustache Sal, a white woman (or perhaps man) who seems to find sexual gratification in the pain, and Mighty Dyke, a Black woman who resents the violence and wants him punished for the “‘way he used to brand me and beat me leaving those welts in the shape of bats on my

7 In typical Westerns, Jack Halberstam explains, “A woman with a gun,” and thus, power “is either mad, bad, or a big old dyke” (192). This formula holds true for most of the female characters featured in _Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down_, whose female characters are not rendered as complexly as their male counterparts.
fine yellow frame’” (93). Although Reed is able to imagine a Western hero who does not continue the tradition of needless killing, he nevertheless creates a space where women are not safe from this cruelty. In part, this violence against women seems to be an attempt to shore up Loop’s sexuality and therefore his masculinity. As Patrick McGee writes, “Black men are able to claim membership in the public sphere of American democracy only by demonstrating a masculinity—and, by implication, a patriarchal relation to the other gender—that is equal to that of white men” (69). But this strategy simply results in violence to “enforce white supremacy” (69). Black critics might call this violence against women “backward, embarrassing, and counter-productive” (Martin 77). As Reed explains, “the lurid scenes are in the book because that is what the form calls for. They’re not in there to shock” (Conversations 63). While almost all the other characters bite the dust, Loop lives, indicating that he does not inhabit a self-destructive identity but a new one that is, in fact, regenerated through violence. In this case, the Black cowboy is the hero, but Loop’s survival comes at the cost of violence towards women and gay men.

Yet the Loop Garoo Kid goes by many names that merge into one, as other scholars have noted, and as Reed explains in the title of an earlier poem, “Loop Garoo Means Change Into.” With such a name, the reader knows to expect surprises, and it is productive to view him through the lens of the Western itself to see how he rejects and conforms to the conventional notions of a cowboy hero, much of which implicitly revolves around gender and sexuality. Although the Western has normalized the cowboy figure as white, heterosexual, and violent, “the frontier represents as well a space where the masculine ideal can be interrogated” (Johnson, Black Masculinity 10). McVeigh agrees, noting that Reed’s text embodies “a reversal of the form’s traditional narrative
structure. In Reed’s reconfiguring of the Western, the outsiders are the heroes and traditional American society represents villainy” (151). Reed does so through his protagonist, particularly in regards to Loop’s choice of weapons and when he chooses to wield them, both of which are deeply enmeshed in Loop’s sexuality. While these narrative choices legitimize Black men and restore their experiences in the West, this empowerment comes at the expense of women and gay men.

One of the most striking aspects of Loop is that he carries a whip, an oddity for a Western hero in a land where gunfights are the norm. Indeed, if men in a Western do not possess or use a gun, they are typically seen as “not men at all” (Halberstam 191). The gun comes to stand in for the man’s sexuality, and its absence denotes his weakness and femininity. If a whip does appear in a Western, it is usually a woman who wields it since a whip “can be accommodated to the female body in a way the gun cannot” (192). Thus, Loop’s choice of weapon weirds the figure of the hero-cowboy and at the same time parodies the western phallus. Reed plays on the latent homosexuality in Western films when men admire each other’s guns in a scene where a foreman laments, “‘Those kids said some nasty things about the six gun . . . . Said we ought to unzip our pants and draw it from there’” (51). The younger generation recognizes the homosexual undertones of the Western, but such a thought horrifies the old timers who prefer to view their male bond as platonic. By contrast, Loop’s whip harkens back to slaveholders and overseers who used the whip to punish insubordinate slaves. Loop is the specter of slavery come back to punish whites who benefited from this institution, and he embodies America’s ignominious past as well as its greatest fear: a Black man with power, the figure at the center of Howard’s text.
Although Loop is described as hyper-violent, he does not display this violence in the narrative space of *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, except against Mustache Sal, leading Michael Johnson to conclude that Reed challenges the “violent masculine ideals [that remain] central to articulations of the frontier myth” (*Black Masculinity* 10). Loop’s whip, however, signals alternative forms of violence that collapse the history of slavery and women’s seductive power.

For instance, when Loop confronts John Wesley Hardin, summoned from the dead by Drag Gibson, Loop does not kill him. The resurrection of Hardin is significant not only because he was a prolific murderer and famed gunslinger, but also because his first murder was that of a former slave named “Maje,” which began his life as an outlaw (Parsons 16). As Hardin rants about all the Black men he has killed, which by middle age “had become an obsession,” “a white python fell from the chandelier and coiled itself around John Wesley Hardin, its ruby red tongue and eyes staring directly into the famous gunslinger’s face” (116). The snake strangles Hardin, Drag Gibson’s “last hope” until his “hair had turned completely white. His pupils were crosses” (117). This strangulation summons the history of racial violence and lynching, most often carried out using a noose. The snake and the whip are similar in this instance, and they both indicate Loop’s ability to control nature and his hypersexuality. As Tietchen points out, the snake is an especially important figure as it represents Damballah, the loa Loop uses in his hoodoo rites, “with the power to manifest himself behind symbols that only appear to be essential representations” (332-3). If the Western is about man’s struggle to contain savagery and nature, then Loop’s reclamation of nature and the power it offers is a forceful contestation. Loop literally overpowers Hardin with a symbol of his Black masculinity,
which is a weird combination of the slave past and female power. In short, Loop
simultaneously reclaims the symbol of racial violence (noose) and female sexual
deviance (snake) in order to remake his Black masculinity. For the majority of the text,
Loop does not confront his enemies directly but conquers them through conjure and their
own paranoia alone in his mountainside cave. In other words, he chooses to “liberate
through the force of imagination rather than firepower” (Davis 416), a clear rejection of
Western masculine ideals and a technique Reed seems to employ in his own text.

Another liminal figure who disrupts the Western, even as a stock character, is
Chief Showcase. Rather than riding a horse, Showcase instead commands a helicopter
named “The Flying Brush Beeve Monster,” which the frightened townspeople describe as
“something right out of Science Fiction” (37). This detail situates Showcase as
technologically advanced, reversing the stereotype of the primitive Indian amazed at the
white colonizer’s god-like knowledge. Indeed, the white settlers react to Showcase’s
invention with “Legends, whispering among the peasants, protective charms on the door
of each house. The whole bit” (38). While Showcase holds the upper hand in this regard,
in other ways he is willing to play his expected role to his advantage. As Tietchen notes,
Chief Showcase’s poetry fulfills the role of the angry Indian “that American society has
come to demand of Native American figures” (336). While Showcase reads his poetry,
which starts with the curse “eat out of me backwards paleface!” he is met with approval
by his white audience precisely because they believe his outlet to be ultimately futile.
“What bitter and tortured Americana!” one audience member raves (79); another praises
him as a “child of nature” (80). Let him read his poetry, they seem to say, because that is
all he can do. However, in rendering him one-dimensional, the white townspeople miss
how he uses this role to achieve his ultimate goal of undermining and destroying their society. He is the trickster figure, popular in African American and Native American stories, who cannot be pinned down.

In an early critique of Yellow Back Radio, Madge Ambler compares Chief Showcase to Booker T. Washington, who was willing “to play one of the enemy against the other” (128), and who “represents the particular people in the minority groups who live off the fat of the ruling class only to infiltrate and destroy them from within” (127). Chief Showcase not only rescues Loop but also demonstrates for him the power of duplicity, that the best way to attack the enemy is indirectly. “I’m trying the same thing on him he [the white man] put us through,” Showcase explains, “Foment mischief among his tribes and they will destroy each other” (Reed, Yellow Back 40). Part of this mischief involves pursuing the women of Yellow Back Radio. Like the Loop Garoo Kid, Chief Showcase is also depicted as hypersexual in an effort to establish his superior masculinity. When Drag sends his men to capture Loop after the cowboy disrupts Drag’s wedding to Mustache Sal—who Robert Davis argues is a “very thinly disguised Mary Magdalene” (412)—Showcase volunteers to stay with the women, “his arms outstretched and a slight grin on his face” (81). This action situates him in direct contrast to Drag, who cannot stand to have them present—“All of you women clear outta here you’re bringing me down” (81). After Mustache Sal has an affair with Showcase, she thinks, “Something else, this Indian. For the first time she understood where Tonto was at . . . . They ought to change his name to Chief Feelgood” (111). Showcase is also feminized through his love of fine things, such as French champagne, “imported hookahs, Pierre Cardin originals, moccasins decorated with rhinestones, aqua-blue headdress, [and] world-wide aeroplane
credit” (57). As he tells Loop, “‘we Crows are called the Beau Brummels of the Indians’” (42), a reference to an English dandy who lived a life of fashionable decadence. Just as his helicopter “stirred up the sand so that Loop couldn’t make out its dimensions” (37), Chief Showcase’s identity is equally perplexing.

The male partnership that briefly forms between Loop and Showcase has roots in the twentieth-century Western. The name “The Loop Garoo Kid” echoes the Western tradition of two male cowboys who, after some initial differences, become an inseparable pair. Although “the male hero may begin and end his quest alone . . . he often has male company along the way” (Halberstam 194). Showcase initially may seem to be the updated version of Tonto to Loop’s Lone Ranger but acts more like a Sundance Kid to Loop’s Butch Cassidy. Although they share similar agendas, rather than follow Loop as Tonto would, Showcase has his own plans. The two are immediate friends; “‘I recognized you right away, O Morning Star,’” Showcase says to Loop after rescuing him from Bo Shmo and his neo-social realist gang (Reed, *Yellow Back* 42). He continues by noting that “‘Indians and black people have been roaming the plains of America together for hundreds of years. . . . Dick Gregory represented our Washington tribes in their treaty fights’” and “‘the Seminole fought invasion after invasion against the Fiend to protect black fugitive slaves’” (42). Together, Loop and Showcase represent “a positive image of multiethnic unity” (Weixlmann 59). However, the relationship between the two men comes perilously close to threatening their heterosexuality. The only physical contact Loop and Showcase have after their initial meeting is through their shared sexual relationships with Mustache Sal. In this way, Moustache Sal is both a non-typical and a stereotypical character whose gender and sexuality is left in question. Accordingly, like
the stereotypical homophobic cowboy, the only alternative is for Reed’s heroes to use women for sex and to eschew intimacy.

Reed references what Chris Packard calls “the erotic affection that undergirds” the relationship between a cowboy and his sidekick that is ubiquitous to pre-1900s Westerns (1). The cowboys’ sexuality, Packard explains, even if not named, was no secret, which in turn gave rise to the parodies in the mid twentieth century and paved the way for Reed’s own critique via Drag Gibson (1). In a typical Western, the story cannot end with the hero in the arms of a woman. Such an action would be read as a submission to domesticity, which lessens the cowboy’s appeal that is based on male freedom and individualism. Instead, “Loneliness is almost always resolved for the cowboy in the Western by another cowboy and not by a woman” (Halberstam 191). At first it seems that Reed challenges this generic convention with the promise that Loop will get the girl in the end in the form of Black Diane, otherwise known as Erzuli, the Haitian African spirit similar to Christian conceptions of the Virgin Mary (Davis 413). However, Robert Davis argues that “it seems essential that the myth of horse opera not be enforced or even recapitulated in its entirety” (418). In an interview, Reed explains, “It’s a trick ending. Some people interpreted it as Loop Garoo going back to Rome” (Conversations 37-38). The implication is that Loop is still out there, yet Reed seems to imply that “Loop can offer no model for the peoples of the West except that of independence from all forms and continuous and spontaneous creation of new ones” (Davis 418). This message is complicated by the depiction of Loop’s hypermasculinity, which seems to reify the very genre conventions against which Reed writes.
On the other hand, the white men in *Yellow Back Radio* are emasculated and parodied to such a degree that there is not one redeeming representation among them, an apt reversal of racist white texts such as Howard’s that deny humanity to Black and indigenous characters. However, one troubling aspect of this ridicule that is often ignored by critics is Reed’s treatment of homosexuality, which is depicted as pathological and deviant. Drag Gibson’s character is the most disconcerting. He is coded as queer through his actions, such as when he “removed a tube from his pocket and applied it to his lips” (19) and later “wiped smudges of mascara that showed above his batting lashes” (22). His name is significant for, as he conveniently explains, “Drag is not only nickname for the horseman who rides to the rear of the herd catching the dust, bringing up the stragglers and sick among the cattle but my name is also shorthand for something scaly, slimy and huge with dirt” (47). What he does not mention is that “drag” is also an obvious reference to the act of cross-dressing. Drag’s homosexuality is paired with his failure to perform as a cowboy, the icon of the American West. The gay or sexually deviant characters featured in Reed’s novel function as caricatures of the United States government whose homosexuality is meant to highlight the degradation of the nation. At the same time, these characters acknowledge the Western as a site of queer desire, one that can be used to critique America’s imperialist reliance on dominant masculinity. Yet this critique is never fulfilled since the narrative does not venture beyond this comedic intent. While Reed weirds the West in order to make room for Black and other marginal subjects in the Western genre, his text cannot avoid reifying the very form of dominant masculinity that his work sets out to critique, which haunts his novel and seems to be the ontological trouble with the Weird West.
One of the most startling examples from the text of Drag’s sexual deviancy is the scene in which he French kisses his beloved green mustang, a grotesque display that pairs Drag’s supposed homosexuality with his overall sexual corruption. Although this scene may seem inconsequential and mainly employed for the sake of humor, the horse is a figure one should pay close attention to in Westerns, as Jane Tompkins argues. Since horses are ubiquitous in this genre, they are often overlooked. “Because of this strange invisibility they are the place where everything in the genre is hidden” (105). As Reed explains, “In a Western, the macho male hero always prefers his horse to women” (Conversations 181). Drag Gibson is not meant to be a character at all, but the personification of abstract ideas of capitalism. “That is an old tradition in Afro-American culture where abstract forces are referred to as though they are real or as if they were people” (181). The novel tells us that Drag’s horse “served as a symbol for his streams of fish, his herds, his fruit so large they weighed down the mountains, black gold and diamonds which lay in untapped fields, and his barnyard overflowing with robust and erotic fowl” (19). The horse clearly embodies Drag’s ownership of nature, which he exploits for his own gains, both sexually and materially. Drag’s treatment of his horse is reminiscent of the way slaveholders sexually abused their slaves, an evil that was justified through the denial of a slave’s humanity and their label as property, rendering them sexually available objects to be exploited at the owner’s whim. Indeed, as Tompkins states, “The horse, like a colonized subject, makes a man a master” (116). The kiss displays Drag’s complete dominance, which is essential to the stereotypical cowboy’s identity.
Reed weirs the figure of the horse, so essential to Westerns, to signal the abuse of both African American and Native Americans through the figure of the corrupt gay cowboy.

The fact that the horse is described as a mustang is also significant. Mustangs are wild horses descended from breeds the Spanish brought over when they introduced this species to North America but has come to be seen as an ultimate American symbol. Congress acknowledged this symbolism, declaring in the Wild and Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971 “that wild free-roaming horses and burros are living symbols of the historic and pioneer spirit of the West” (1). Thus the mustang acts as a symbol of the American myth of the West, which has been contaminated by the nation’s lurid past of genocide and colonialism. As another cowhand in the text remarks, “‘Sometimes I think the whole continent is accursed’” (100). Loop Garoo Kid steals Drag’s horse from him. “From then on the Hoo-Doo cowboy would hagride the night holding the horn of the lone green horse” (68). In the process, this horse also signals the depravity of both Drag and the Western genre, which have been tarnished through their participation in American imperialism and one that Reed seeks to rescue and rework as a vehicle for his critique. As Tietchen notes, a typical Western plot tends “to place the ‘hero’ in confrontational situations with his counterimage, a villain who possesses the exact opposite characteristics of the hero, and, in the end, must be destroyed outright so that law and order may prevail” (329). In this way Yellow Back Radio performs this genre convention by figuring Loop and Chief Showcase as hypermasculine and sexually robust while Drag Gibson is reduced to a monstrous and vile mockery of the West.
Reed’s novel tends to collapse sex and gender in order to make tangible its critique of race and colonialism. Loop’s weapon of choice, a whip, again indicates how Reed deploys a queer critique. Just as Reed empowers Loop through his Black masculinity, which is a weird combination of his (male) gender and (female) sexuality, he applies a similar approach to the character of Drag Gibson. However, Drag’s supposed gender identity, which Reed depicts as female, is complicated by his sexual identity, which is both dominant and submissive. Indeed, Drag is a failed cowboy, which also means that he is a failed man. Through a binary view of gender, that emasculation renders Drag a woman, a role he performs through dress and use of makeup. Yet Drag exploits women and nature alike, a trait that is more typical in depictions of heterosexual white male colonizers. Drag seems to be asexual except when it comes to his horse, a relationship that signals bestiality and a disregard for what the novel would deem appropriate sexual desire. While his dominance and ruthless attitude make him hateful in the eyes of the audience, it is his supposedly degenerate sexuality that drives the nail home for Reed. By extension this critique is also symbolically true for white settlers in general, in particular his white female counterpart in the figure of Mustache Sal. Reed immediately calls into question Sal’s gender identity through her ambiguous name. While she otherwise presents as female, she is characterized as having an extraordinary sexual appetite and sexualizes Loop and Showcase’s race. Yet Loop’s dominance over her with his whip again places her in the subordinate position. Her attempts at achieving power fail when Drag thwarts her plot to poison him and sentences her to death by feeding her to his carnivorous hogs. Ultimately, Mustache Sal, and white women in general, are portrayed as weak creatures incapable of containing their sexual desires, a failure that is
depicted more of as a joke than a threat, who are locked in an alliance with white men that will eventually lead to their doom.

Another character coded as a sexual deviant and queer is Field Marshall Theda Doompussy, who relies on his Black masseuse for pleasure and comfort in the face of his conflicts with other government officials who do not take him seriously. After being pleasured by his masseur, Theda compliments him: “[your] strong black hands just seem to make my bones jump and shout for joy” (140). Theda is willing to give up his property for more erotic pleasure from his masseuse: “Please ask the owner for my car keys. You can come to my apartment and take anything you want. Take my credit cards, take my status—it doesn’t mean anything just do it to me more often, you know how you do things so fine and sweet,” he says as he “nestled his head next to the black masseur’s thighs” (140). Tellingly, this scene takes place in “an underground rub down Palace in the basement of the Army headquarters” (140). Not only are American cowboys coded as queer, but so is the entire United States military force. Like the Loop Garoo Kid and Chief Showcase, the masseurs also undermine the system by working from within it. In the act of giving pleasure, not only do these masseurs reinforce Black men’s sexual superiority, but they also emphasize white men’s sexual degeneracy. In the process, they distract the military from external threats that Loop poses. When Theda asks his masseur about hoodoo, “the other Black attendants started to roll their eyes and drop their towels” (142). The masseur calms Theda: “it’s nothing Theda, nothing to get upset about” (142). Like Chief Showcase, these masseurs give the white men exactly what they desire, rendering white men incapable of fighting by slowly weakening them with their embrace. In Howard’s text, white men are acutely frightened and wary of Black sexuality, but in
Reed’s novel, the inability of the white male characters to comprehend the true power dynamic in their sexual relationships leads to their undoing. However, Reed implies that these Black characters are deploying a queer sexual performance as a mode of resistance against white supremacy and not as an indication of their true sexuality, which Reed would view as deviant. Ironically, while these Black men perform a queer sexuality, instead of rendering them as subordinate, their performance shores up their hypersexuality, which is potent enough to overpower either gender. Thus, this Black queer performance undermines depictions of both Black sexual deviance and white supremacy. At the same time, however, this critique also renders homosexuality (or, more broadly, anything other than heterosexuality) as pathological. While the Black men perform queerness to overpower their enemies, Reed implies that his white characters are weakened by their queer desire, which acts as an indicator of their inferiority and gullibility, thus reproducing the homophobic discourse so often perpetuated in traditional westerns.

Leslie Fiedler’s “Come Back to the Raft” suggests that the American male is overcome with fear that in the end, after his conquest for power, he will be rejected and incapable of being loved. Thus, the colonizer turns to a man of color, hoping that he “will fold us in his arms… he will comfort us, as if our offense against him were long ago remitted, were never truly real” (150). Fiedler argues that this scenario will never be fulfilled because men of color are never depicted as equal subjects, so the white male fantasy of love must be lived out through dreams and fictions. Tietchen argues that Reed’s text erases and censures homosexuality like contemporary Westerns in an attempted critique of Euro-American masculinity and mastery (338-9). While this is
partly true, not recognizing Reed’s weird critique also erases the novel’s more intricate critique of race and colonialism. Scholars have largely ignored Reed’s utilization of gender and sexuality, which prefigures scholarship on the gay cowboy but also casts homosexuality as a sign of degeneracy, corruption, and weakness. By portraying these white authority figures as queer and incompetent, the Loop Garoo Kid and Chief Showcase become virile and dominant characters who have overpowered the perverted and pathetic institutions of the United States government. At the same time, Reed acknowledges the queer bond between cowboys and makes them shockingly apparent. Yet in order to avoid a mis-identification of Reed as a queer writer, it is better to view his novel from the perspective of the Weird West.

Although critics have typically read Reed’s *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* as a parody of the Western genre, a more productive analysis can be reached by contextualizing Reed’s work within weird fiction. Such a weird reading is key since it allows for an examination of how race operates in Reed’s novel, but also makes space for considerations that are often obscured within westerns, mainly gender, sexuality, and queerness. At the same time, such a critique demonstrates how these issues dialogue with traditional weird fiction as well as fiction that is not typically associated with this genre. In this way we can consider an alternative trajectory to the tradition of weird fiction by linking two seemingly dissimilar texts, such as Reed’s *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* and Dorothy Scarborough’s *The Wind*, in order to explore their weird strategies that critique the dominant Western and link the figure of the cowboy with American imperialism. Scarborough’s narrative strategies question the perception of frontier life as one defined by freedom from community and from historical precedents. Reed in turn
directly revises the Western novel in order to make available a genre that has become established as the domain of the white heterosexual male. As Tietchen writes, this “is one of the most important functions of the trickster: the trickster attempts to reveal the multiple dimensions essentialist models hope to deny” (337). Following Tietchen’s definition, Reed is the ultimate trickster, but he is by no means the first. As Reed himself prophesizes in the text, “I wouldn’t be surprised if bad medicine steals the patents and calls them his own. Honkie. Devil” (39). Reed highlights the racist assumptions that belie Weird Westerns like Howard’s by welding an African American and queer critique of the western and larger national narrative it often supports. However, in his attempt to legitimate Black men’s experiences in the West, he ends up reifying the homophobic and sexist aspects that the majority of weird western fiction rarely questions and often supports.
Chapter Three
The Alaskan Geography in Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*

Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* (1997) is a foundational Southwestern novel that follows the recovery of World War II veteran Tayo, who returns to the Laguna Pueblo in New Mexico haunted by the violence and loss he experienced in combat, mainly in the Philippines during the Bataan Death March. Despite the critical acclaim and the amount of scholarly attention the novel has received, Joseph Bauerkemper maintains that *Ceremony* “remains paradoxically understudied” (38). One fact about the novel often overlooked is its place of origin in Ketchikan, Alaska. Silko wrote the novel while living in Alaska and during an incredibly difficult period in her life, as she has remarked, “Writing the novel was a ceremony for me to stay sane” (Dexter Fisher 20). In an interview with Robin Cohen, Silko further explains, “I literally wrote *Ceremony* to save my life. That is why it is called *Ceremony*, because I know that I could not have made it if I had not been writing *Ceremony* for those two years. I was so homesick for that Southwestern landscape that that’s why I completely remade it” (257). *Ceremony* has come to stand as an exemplary text produced in what Kenneth Lincoln termed the Native American Renaissance, however, Allan Richard Chavkin contends that it is “misleading” to put Silko’s writing in a firm category of either American literature or Native American literature, suggesting instead “the more useful category of ‘Southwestern literature’” (11). This chapter broadens the critical perspective of Silko’s novel and reorients the place of Alaska as indispensable to understanding the text.

Tayo is haunted by the Southwest’s histories of violence and subjugation, compounded by the post-traumatic stress from his wartime experiences in the Far East,
but there is another geographic dimension—Alaska—that alters the novel’s regional landscape and representations of New Mexico.

Silko’s comments about Alaska deeply inform the novel and its representation of the Southwest. Born in 1948 in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Leslie Marmon Silko was raised at Laguna Pueblo, located about 50 miles west of Albuquerque and bookended by Los Alamos to the north and the Trinity Site to the south. In the Introduction to the most recent Penguin edition of *Ceremony*, Silko relates her memories of Ketchikan, in contrast to Laguna Pueblo:

Located on Revillagigedo Island, 750 miles north of Seattle, Ketchikan had a mild climate by Alaskan standards due in large part to a warm ocean current named the Japanese Current. The average year-round temperature was forty-eight degrees, and the average rainfall was 180 inches, in Chinle the annual rainfall was twelve inches in a good year. (xi)

The Alaskan climate was antithetical to Silko’s Laguna home, where she “was accustomed to the bright sunlight of the Southwest, where the weather permitted activity outdoors all year around. In southeastern Alaska the tall spruce trees, the heavy clouds, fogs and mist and the steep mountains enclosed the town” (xi-xii). The change in climate had a profoundly negative effect on Silko’s mental and physical health. As she explains, “I spent all of June, July, and August fighting off the terrible lethargy of a depression caused in large part by the absence of sunlight” (xii). This recalls her interview with Cohen: “While I was writing the novel, I was not in Ketchikan and the rain anymore; I was back in the Southwest. That is why every description, the rocks, the land—I was literally putting myself in the act of writing” (257-258).
Silko’s career as an esteemed author may never have started if she had not moved to Alaska. In fact, *Ceremony* might never have been written if not for Silko’s unhappiness in having to relocate from her home in the late spring of 1973. “When I was writing *Ceremony*,” she later wrote to poet James Wright in 1978, “I was so terribly devastated by being away from Laguna country that the writing was my way of re-making that place, the Laguna country, for myself” (Silko and Wright 27-28). Silko’s interest in storytelling stems from her aunt Susie and grandma A’mooh, two “vigorous women who valued books and writing,” and she also pays tribute to her grandfather Henry and to her father, who taught her to wander the land of Laguna (*Yellow Woman* 63). “I was never afraid or lonely—though I was high in the hills, many miles from home—because I carried with me the feeling I’d acquired from listening to the old stories, that the land all around me was teeming with creatures that were related to human beings and to me” (42). Silko has often remarked how important storytelling is, not only for the transmission of familial and cultural histories, but also for its generative quality. This belief deeply informs *Ceremony*, whose structure takes the form of a ceremony itself, beginning with an invocation of Ts’its’tsi’nako, Thought-Woman, “and whatever she thinks about/ appears” (1).

The makeup of Silko’s home and family is mixed and comprises various cultural influences. As Victoria Lautman explains to Nina Metz, there was “a very ambiguous relationship” between the Marmons “and the rest of the full-blooded Native Americans” living in Old Laguna (Metz 1). As Silko explains to biographer George Salyer:

> My family are the Marmons at Old Laguna on the Laguna Pueblo Reservation where I grew up. We are mixed bloods—Laguna, Mexican,
and white—but the way we live is like Marmons, and if you are from Laguna Pueblo you will understand what I mean. All those languages, all those ways of living are combined, and live somewhere on the fringes of all three. But I don’t apologize for this any more—not to whites, not to full bloods—our origin is unlike any other. (2)

Silko’s defense of her family background highlights the racial mixing and ethnic heterogeneity that has long existed in the Southwest, despite geographical borders that police cultural and familial histories, both within and outside of tribal lands. Ironically, Alaska offers a place for Silko to remake her Laguna homeland and to recover all the various pieces of New Mexico history lost to the literal and cultural wars abroad and at home.

Silko attended the University of New Mexico, where she earned her BA in English in 1969 and briefly enrolled in the UNM American Indian Law School Fellowship Program and the MA program in English. However, she did not find fulfillment in either of those fields and instead moved to Tsaile, Arizona, to teach at Diné College on the Navajo Nation for two years, during which time she continued to write poetry and short stories. In 1971, she married John Silko and the couple moved to Alaska where they lived in Ketchikan from 1973-1976 (Salyer 5). During this time, Silko finished Ceremony and published it in 1977, on the heels of the nation’s Bicentennial, as Silko explains, to remind Americans “that it was on this stolen land that this country was settled and begun” (Seyersted 24). Silko returned to Laguna Pueblo in 1978 and in 1981 published Storyteller, a collection of poems and short stories, which received a MacArthur Foundation Grant. At that point, she then began writing her second novel,
Almanac of the Dead (1991), followed by her recent memoir, The Turquoise Ledge (2010), which challenges the boundaries between memoir and fiction. Silko currently resides in Tucson, the primary setting for Almanac of the Dead, where she teaches English at the University of Arizona. Almanac of the Dead is largely considered the antithesis of Ceremony, a narrative that crosses the U.S.-Mexico border and reimagines a new revolution through alternative storytelling. Yet from a weird perspective, more similarities emerge between Silko’s first and second novels.

New Mexico and the American Southwest embody potent signifiers for the national imagination, which Silko draws on and writes in her novel. While its landscape and archaeological sites are points of pride, the Southwest appeal to mainstream America lies in a discourse that revels in the speculation concerning mystery, from the ancient rites of the occult to secret government activities. As John Beck explains, many Americans whisper of “secret scientific experiments [and] government cover-ups” in the deserts of the Southwest (64). These whispers are generally dismissed as implausible conspiracy theories, but the people of Laguna Pueblo are all too familiar with government interference and neglect, symbolized for them by the Jackpile-Paguate uranium mine, which appears at a critical point in Ceremony. Beck explains that mainstream America conceives of clandestine cults and UFO sightings in the desert precisely because it often appears as an empty place devoid of life and paradoxically populated by numerous mysteries. This “trope of vacancy” is part of US imperialism, and it “functions as a blind that veils the movements of a capitalist-warrior ascendency since World War II” (77). Ceremony demonstrates the falsity of the assumption of vacancy in the Southwest, but nevertheless indicates the way the region functions in the replication of US imperialism.
both abroad and at home. Beck makes global and regional connections between “Korea, Vietnam, Grenada, Nicaragua, or the Persian Gulf abroad” to the more immediate contexts of “the anti-Vietnam movement, ‘Indian affairs,’ and immigration policy along the border with Mexico at home” (77). Silko makes similar connections in both *Ceremony* and *Almanac of the Dead*, but her first novel makes the critical intervention of demonstrating how this imperialism is replicated in Alaska, a weird move that challenges isolationist narratives and brings the critical focus back to the United States and the treatment of North American indigenous communities.

For Gregory Salyer, the novel makes a connection between Pueblo people and Japanese soldiers, citing Tayo’s unsettling experience of seeing the face of his uncle Josiah in the face of a Japanese soldier standing in front of an American troop’s firing squad (Salyer 269). Joanne Freed argues, “As a member of an internally colonized minority, Tayo identifies with the Japanese soldiers he is fighting, who are also framed by U.S. wartime discourse as nationally and ethnically other” (223). According to Betonie, an unorthodox Navajo medicine man in the novel, Tayo’s connection has a historical precedent: “Thirty thousand years ago they [the Japanese] were not strangers. You saw what the evil had done: you saw the witchery ranging as wide as this world” (*Ceremony* 124). Betonie’s comments echo the teachings of Silko’s family, as Silko tells Thomas Irmer and Matthias Schmidt: “I see myself as a member of the global community. My old folks who raised me saw themselves as citizens of the world. We see no borders” (161). The connection between Laguna people and Japanese soldiers reflects a truth that extends beyond the individual level. As Krista Comer points out, “What is at stake in *Ceremony* is a tale of global redemption” (134). Likewise, Sara Spurgeon
observes that Tayo’s confusion of Japanese and Laguna faces draws the reader’s attention to the similar imperialist projects that the United States has invested on a global scale, as well as a regional one, since the “Japanese army in the Philippines is both a double of the Anglo presence in the Americas, insofar as its presence is an act of violent colonialism, and a disturbing inversion” (88).

Critics also point to the fact that New Mexico and Japan share a history of atomic detonation, as the Manhattan Project unfolded in what is today Los Alamos, a top-secret government site before it became a city, and at White Sands where scientists first tested the atomic bomb. The development and deployment of the first atomic bomb, as Lydia Cooper points out, was “a project that sought as its ultimate goal to exert military and cultural influence on a global scale” (268). Anne McClintock argues that national narratives have also connected the Southwest to the Far East in other ways, contending that once the western frontier was deemed closed in the nineteenth century, the United States began to look elsewhere to recapture the American spirit Frederick Jackson Turner tied to the frontier. McClintock explains that during World War II, “The Japanese were frequently referred to as ‘Indians,’ Japanese warfare was characterized as ‘Indian fighting,’ and Japanese soldiers were described as ‘whooping like Indians’” (826). Following McClintock, the 1945 bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were also acts of colonial repetition since the United States government viewed Japan and other Asian countries as the new “frontier.” Paul Gunn Allen and Patricia Clark argue that the American West has become “the nexus of all modern history,” a stage upon which global issues are played out in individual situations (“Earthly Relations” 191). This process also
works in reverse: the colonization of the American Southwest is something that the United States government reenacts continuously in different global locations.

As Paula Gunn Allen asserts, Americans possess a curious collective amnesia when it comes to remembering disturbing historical events of national significance, particularly the colonization and genocide of indigenous peoples on the western frontier (*The Sacred Hoop* 209). McClintock argues, “The fact that the United States has never dealt with its genocidal past—the dead not atoned for, the massacres not expiated—means that imperial violence is destined for ritualistic repetition. The trope of Indian Country is a phantom, the ghostly mark of transgenerational guilt as yet unatoned for” (826). She continues, “One can hardly overstate how pervasively the trope of ‘Indian Country’ has been used by the United States to characterize as yet unsubjugated territories in active war zones around the world” (825-6). Silko’s novel draws attention to these global connections though the geographic juxtaposition of the Southwest and Japan, which demonstrates how the symbolic and the material meet to enforce American imperialism. However, while exploring these global connections to the regional is essential to understanding Silko’s novel, the imperialist project that interposes the image of “Indian Country” onto foreign lands also does so at home in the United States. Most critics stop short of exploring how Silko works within and still goes beyond the regional with her references to other American frontiers such as Alaska.

The novel’s Alaskan place of origin presents an incongruous site that expands the geography of the Southwest and at the same time critiques the idea of the frontier. Following Mark Fisher, “the weird is that which does not belong” (10-11). In this way, Alaska occupies a weird space in the novel, which in Fisher’s words, “brings to the
familiar something which ordinarily lies beyond it” (10-11). Rather than a supernatural force undergirding the weird in Silko’s novel, there is a strange geographical undercurrent that unsettles the author’s emotional sense of place. The novel’s alternative sense of time and narrative space challenge temporal narratives about the Southwest, but Silko also reframes the region from a weird place that reorients the Southwest from an alternative indigenous space.

_Ceremony_ began as a short story account of a mother attempting to keep her veteran son from drinking. Although she never finished the story, it became the seed for _Ceremony_, and Silko kept the original plot but shifted the perspective and tone from humorous and female to dramatic and male. Silko used the opportunity to connect to her absent family and absentee people: “I realized I wanted to better understand what happened to the war veterans, many of whom were survivors of the Bataan Death March, cousins and relatives of mine who returned from the war and stayed drunk the rest of their lives” (“Preface” xvi). During the writing process, Silko found that the female perspective did not allow her the artistic license she needed to move beyond the autobiographical, so she constructed her story around a male war veteran. Some readers remarked on the novel’s male protagonist, as if it were “something of a novelty for female novelists in the English language” (xviii). Still, Tayo’s life bears many similarities to the author’s own. Silko remembers, “Once I started writing the novel, the depression lifted, but then came the terrible migraine headaches . . . . I stayed in a darkened bedroom for eight hours at a time while the vertigo spun the bed. Fortunately, as the main character, Tayo, began to recover from his illness, I too began to feel better, and had
fewer headaches” (xv). *Ceremony* is a tale of survival that is as much about the author and her imaginary tribal community as it is about the main character and WWII.

One must read for the parallels between Silko’s geographical and psychological landscapes to understand better the novel’s weird Southwest. The homesickness that Silko relates while being separated from her family at Laguna Pueblo parallels the effects of PTSD on the Tayo character. Just as Tayo’s flashbacks that juxtaposed the Philippines with Laguna led to his later realization about the interconnection of all living things, Silko’s homesickness comes to the fore in her novelistic representations of the Southwestern landscape, which are dramatically different from living in Alaska. In *Storyteller*, Silko argues that the act of storytelling is a communal survival strategy that gives audience members “the heart to face danger with the hope that if they did exactly what the survivor had done then they too might survive” (xviii). *Ceremony* embodies Silko’s philosophy about storytelling, but it more importantly illustrates the ways Silko draws an imaginary construction of place, equally important to the material reality of place, especially for a mixed-blood person with ambiguous ties to the Laguna tribal community and at a physical distance from her homeland. As Silko relates to Metz, “The detail and attention to the landscape and the sky might not have been so central had I been living in New Mexico at the time” (1).

*Ceremony’s* structure and blending of myth, reality, history, and fiction shows no adherence to genre boundaries, at least following Louis Owens (27). James Ruppet explores how Silko juxtaposes and blends Native and non-Native ideologies in order to question ideas surrounding the legitimation of certain forms of knowledge. Silko physically reorients the reader by weirding their perspective and tilting it towards Alaska
rather than the Far East, such that the novel moves beyond the regional but still works within national boundaries, even while questioning the ideologies that maintain those boundaries. As Susan Kollin discerns, “Considered one of the world’s only remaining wilderness areas and one of its most popular tourist destinations, Alaska has been understood as the nation’s ‘Last Frontier,’ a region whose history has yet to be written and whose ‘virgin lands’ have yet to be explored” (42). Despite being the largest American state, it is also “the sparest state,” James Cahalan observes, “with one sole person per square mile, in contrast to Pennsylvania’s 274 and Rhode Island’s 1,003, has been a magnet for wilderness literature” (265). While Frederick Jackson Turner declared the closing of the Western frontier in 1893, Kollin maintains that “Alaska comes to take the place of Southwest and West” (48). Frank Arone concurs and argues that in Alaska, “the twentieth century has reincarnated nineteenth century frontier life,” since Alaska “closely resembles the exciting and challenging interior of the United States that was peopled by the pioneers who pushed across the Alleghenies” (174). Alaska meets the needs of this frontier spirit, Arone claims, “not merely because it is merely unbuilt and unpopulated but because its conditions are rugged and offer the challenges and rewards of a new nation” (174).

The U.S. purchased Alaska from the Russian Empire on March 30, 1867, and it became a U.S. territory on May 11, 1912, just a few months after New Mexico became the 47th state, and the Alaskan territory became the 49th state on January 3, 1959 (Naska and Slotnick 330). Although the 1867 Treaty of Cession with Russia recognized Alaskan tribes, “Alaska territorial leaders and courts generally ignored the treaty’s mention of tribal existence, and post-Civil War federal Indian policy shifted from treaty making and
segregation to assimilation of the Indian tribes” (Case and Dorough 13). Alaskan Natives thus were not subject to the Dawes Act of 1887. However, on December 18, 1971, Congress passed the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA). David Case and Dalee Dorough explain:

Avoiding termination and reservations, the result for Alaska Natives was a unique act that (1) extinguished aboriginal title of the tribal villages to some 365 million acres, (2) authorized transfer of some 45 million acres to state-chartered Alaska Native village and regional corporations, and (3) ‘compensated’ those corporations in the amount of $962.5 million for ‘extinguishment’ of aboriginal title. However, neither the land nor the money went to the tribes. (13)

Indigenous Alaskan lands became part of tribally-based “corporations” in which members were considered “shareholders” (13). The term “extinguishment” is particularly troubling to Native activists since it undermines tribal sovereignty and Native rights. Like New Mexico, military bases and cultural and geographical tourism comprise a large portion of Alaska’s economy, in addition to natural gas and oil industries. Alaska thus contains many parallels to the Land of Enchantment, as a “place of infinite metaphorical multiplicity” (Beck 64)

The novel’s origins in Alaska are linked to the novel’s plot by other historical incidents, namely “The Forgotten War” of WWII, which included the June, 1942, Japanese attack and occupation of the Aleutians, “an American-owned chain of remote, sparsely inhabited, volcanic islands extending some 1,200 miles west of the Alaskan Peninsula” (“Battle” 1). While occupying the islands of Attu and Kiska, which were
home to the Aleut people, Japanese forces took roughly 40 Natives living on the Attu Island captive and later relocated them to a prison camp near Otaru, Hokkaido, Japan, where they were held for three years. Between 16 and 22 Aleuts died while in prison; the rest were freed following the end of the war, but were never able to return to their homes on Attu, which was subsequently abandoned after WWII (Cloe 32-33). American troops liberated the island on May 30, 1943 following the Battle of Attu, “the only land battle fought on American soil in World War II” (“Battle” 1). This history is largely forgotten under the conception that the war was exclusively fought in Europe and in the Far East. Like Tayo, the Aleut inhabitants of Attu were prisoners of war, even though they were civilians and not soldiers. In part, this untold history of Alaska Natives stems from the fact that the United States government differentiates between Alaskan Natives and Native people living within the lower 48 states (Case and Dorough 13). The nation turns a blind eye to the violence against Native people in the Southwest, but it is doubly blind to the history of forced relocation, boarding schools, and illegalization of cultural practices for Natives living in Alaska.

Alaska appears in Ceremony in more subtle forms. The main focus in Ceremony is Tayo’s journey to physical and spiritual recovery. After he returns to the United States, Tayo recuperates in a veteran’s hospital where he is treated by an Army psychiatrist to whom Tayo describes himself as no longer human but as “white smoke” (Silko 14). As the novel describes it, “white smoke had no consciousness of itself. It faded into the white world of their bed sheets and walls; it was sucked away by the words of doctors who tried to talk to the invisible scattered smoke” (14). Salyer explains that Tayo sees himself as “invisible” and the “white smoke” is evidence of “a desperate attempt to
integrate himself into the world of white culture” (269). Meanwhile, Peter Beidler
observes that “Ceremony is the story of Tayo’s return from death to life, the story of how
this bit of smoke, this post, this clay with a dead rodent for a tongue, becomes animate
again and thus able to tell his story to the tribal elders” (15). For William Oandasa, Tayo
“feels like a form without substance, like an outline, smoke or fog—a ghost” (240), while
David Rice interprets the “white smoke” as the colonial forces of “white doctors who
diagnose, categorize, anesthetize, and otherwise control his body” (119). Indeed, the
novel describes the “white smoke” as a pervasive and invisible force that permeates the
veteran’s hospital in a ghostly way and yet at the same time makes visible the ideology of
whiteness and sanitation. Yet in a more material way, this white smoke is also
reminiscent of walking in snow or fog, much like Silko encountered in Alaska.

The phrase “white smoke” reminds readers of Silko’s own place inside and
outside of the novel, thus weirding the perspective of place. Like Tayo, Silko experienced
a sharp and traumatic break from her home and culture. Similarly, part of Tayo’s
“sickness,” according to the Anglo doctors, is that he experiences unsettling moments of
confusion in which the faces of his Japanese prisoners and later captors are overlaid with
Laguna faces from home (7). Tayo cannot reconcile how such a familiar image can
appear in an alien landscape. Initially, as Oandasa argues, “His undermined health is
manifested in feelings of hollowness, his lost sense of time which moves forward and
backward in flashes of memory and consciousness, and many, more phenomenon that are
beyond his control” (241). This sense of confusion and displacement is pervasive in
Ceremony, perhaps because it mirrors the author’s own experiences while she was
writing the book. Describing the Alaskan wilderness, Silko writes:
Here the winter landscape can suddenly metamorphose into a seamless, blank white so solid that pilots in aircraft without electronic instruments lose their bearings and crash their planes into the frozen tundra, believing down to be up. Here on the Alaskan tundra, in mid-February, not all the space-age fabrics, electronics, or engines can ransom human beings from the restless, shifting forces of the winter sky and winter earth. (*Yellow Woman* 45)

Silko describes a world dominated by whiteness. Likewise, Tayo feels his sanity unraveling at moments when he observes sameness where Western culture sees opposites. In short, “Tayo is haunted by connections and relationships that no one else seems to see” (Salyer 269).

Through her descriptions of the Alaskan climate, Silko weirds the reader’s perspective of place by making whiteness a visible force that overcomes technology and the ideology of progress, an idea that Silko returns to in *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) through her descriptions of a Yupik medicine woman, who uses technology and cultural stories against “greedy destroyers of the land” (Salyer 275). Perhaps Betonie best parallels Yupik, because he makes Tayo see the connections between Pueblo and Japanese people. Like Tayo, Silko also recognized the symbolic similarities between Japanese and Native American people in the eyes of the United States government. While drafting *Ceremony*, Silko relates that she ate lunch every day at Mrs. Hirabayashi’s café, whose family, “like other Japanese Americans, were imprisoned in internment camps during the war, and it was Gordon Hirabayashi, Mrs. Hirabayashi’s son, who with others worked tirelessly to secure redress for the crime from the U.S. Congress” (“Preface” xiv).
Starting in 1942, the United States government forced Japanese American citizens to evacuate the West Coast and move into internment camps located in states such as Arizona, Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming. Additionally, the U.S. government opened Immigration and Naturalization Service prison camps in New Mexico and Texas, among others, which held individuals of Japanese descent extradited from several Latin American countries, an action that the American government justified “on the grounds of hemispheric security” (Mak n.p.). This experience of forced removal and relocation echoes the violent displacement and removal of indigenous peoples in U.S. history, and her experience in Alaska makes these parallels between Japanese and Native people evident at home.

As Salyer explains, “Tayo’s problem does not center on assimilation into the white demarcations of difference and a loss of native understandings of wholeness as we might expect. Rather, Tayo’s sickness comes from being unable to forget that wholeness when the world demands that he follow the dictates of otherness” (269). Ironically, distance from the homeland generates an alternative consciousness about history, for both Silko and Tayo. Initially, Silko’s depiction of her experiences in the unfamiliar Alaskan landscape is also similar to Tayo’s shock in the Philippines. Both foreign landscapes initially seem to be alien and weird. Tayo lashes out against the Filipino jungle during his grueling trek during the Bataan March:

When Tayo prayed on the long muddy road to the prison camp, it was for dry air, dry as a hundred years squeezed out of yellow sand, air to dry out the oozing wounds of Rocky’s leg . . . . Tayo hated this unending rain as if it were the jungle green rain and not the miles of marching or the japanese
grenade that was killing Rocky. . . . He damned the rain until the words were a chant, and he sang it while he crawled through the mud. . . . all the time he could hear his own voice praying against the rain. (12)

In the process of longing for home and shunning the unfamiliar, Tayo ends up “damning one of the most holy things in the Pueblo world” (Spurgeon 85). Tayo later comes to the harsh realization that everything is indeed connected. As Spurgeon explains, “his curse against the rain haunts him upon his return to Laguna,” when he witnesses the devastation years of drought brought on his family and community (85). Indeed, the ceremony is only complete when the rain finally comes.

James Tarter explains that “In a paradox of great magnitude, Tayo’s culturally specific emplacement—his Laguna sense of place—is what enables relationality to many other people and stories: Tayo’s vision of precise, politicized lines of interconnection (‘transitions’ rather than a simplistic collapse of all distinctions) can only come as he reaches a ‘belonging with’ his own particular place” (107). However, Tayo’s reunion with the land has been interpreted as reinforcing essentialist connections between Native Americans and nature. Comer argues that Ceremony “converges with western exceptionalism; the notion of the West as a kind of ‘last stand’ of (Anglo-European) possibility” (134). While Comer is correct to note that “Ceremony, via its representation of holistic Native culture and wilderness reservation lands, is a kind of environmentalists’ utopia” (135), the place of Alaska complicates the assertion that the novel is about the Southwest. As Comer also points out, “the 1970s mark the transition of the West into America’s most urban region” (136), a fact that challenges mythic perceptions of the empty Southwest and increases the need for a new imaginary frontier, thus enters Alaska
in the mid-twentieth century. As the novel reaches its climax, Tayo stands at the entrance of the Jackpile-Paguate mine on Laguna Pueblo, where he finally sees that his PTSD is a symptom and not the source of his sickness. He realizes that the connections he sees are so real that they are made material in the land itself in the form of leftover uranium waste. The Jackpile-Paguate mine serves as a warning against environmental destruction inside New Mexico but also in places like Alaska, which has been the site of uranium mining at the Ross-Adams deposit located in the Bokan Mountain on Prince of Wales Island, which has yielded over 1.3 million pounds of uranium to date (MacKevett 25). Though it remains closed since the early 1970s, rumors of its reopening still swirl, and there is also interest in the area of Boulder Creek near Nome, which contains Alaska’s largest uranium deposit, with the local community protesting corporate mining interests (Ruckel 1).

The Jackpile-Paguate uranium mine began operation in 1952, “which ran night and day for thirty years until 1982” (Tarter 105-106). The owner of the mine “was issued a lease by the Bureau of Indian Affairs to 7,500 acres of Laguna Pueblo land,” which “was comprised of a huge open-pit uranium mine, at 2,800 acres the largest of its kind in the United States, and an adjoining milling operation” (105-106). Only years later was the severity of this operation made public when “the Government Accounting Office revealed that all of the groundwater into which the Laguna Pueblo wells are tapped was also highly irradiated” by runoff from the then-abandoned mine (107). Tarter notes, “The fact that such an environmentally devastating policy was carried out in many forms in the Four Corners area — mainly on native land — led the U.S. government to designate the entire Four Corners region as a ‘National Sacrifice Area’ in 1974” (107-108). Silko seems to imply that the Jackpile-Paguate exposes the fiction of a “national sacrifice area”
and the truth about the atomic bomb. Tayo realizes that those individuals who compartmentalize the human condition are in reality the ones who facilitate environmental destruction and the threat of nuclear annihilation. These individuals, “the destroyers,” are those who “had taken these beautiful rocks from deep within earth and they had laid them in a monstrous design, realizing destruction on a scale only they could have dreamed. [Tayo] cried the relief he felt at finally seeing the pattern, the way all the stories fit together—the old stories, the war stories, their stories—to become the story that was still being told” (Ceremony 229). As Spurgeon observes, “The irony here is that the most deadly symbol of modern American imperialism, the ultimate product of the frontier myth, is the very thing that finally destroys the racial, national, and cultural borders it was intended to protect” (98).

Tarter notes that it is at the Jackpile-Paguate mine that “the novel’s sense of place is most radically historicized and politicized as Tayo’s traditional, place-based ceremony is inserted into a particular, contemporary historical context that calls for action” (105). In her collection of essays Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit (1996), Silko writes, “It is dangerous to designate some places sacred when all are sacred. Such compromises imply that there is a hierarchy of value, with some places and some living beings not as important as others. No part of the earth is expendable; the earth is a whole that cannot be fragmented” (94). Silko expounds on the theme of inter-connection in Ceremony, but the place that facilitates this theme is not the Southwest, as most critics contend. As Comer observes, “Landscape and a reconnection with the earth return Tayo from the land of the dead, what the narrator calls the ‘invisible,’ to that of the living” (133). Here, the “invisible” is not a supernatural or ideological force propelling the novel forward.
Instead, the “invisible” part of the novel is the place of Alaska and its “blank white” spaces that turn the environmental destruction of American corporations and progress against itself.

The connection between the Southwest and Alaska became all too public following the Exxon Valdez oil spill, which occurred in Prince William Sound, Alaska, on March 24, 1989. Public outcry was loud in response to the environmental disaster, yet the mainstream media largely ignores the inter-connections across time and space. As Kollin notes, “Alaska’s position as a uniquely wild space, as a location that ‘cries out for originality and distinction’ can only emerge with the belief that the nation's other landscapes are somehow irrevocably lost. In this sense, the region’s role as the ‘Last Frontier,’ as a radically other American terrain, serves primarily to overcome U.S. environmental anxieties” (72). Indeed, in light of the Exxon oil spill, the mainstream media and greater American public had to face the reality of expansionist ideology and its very real environmental effects. As Silko’s novel argues, true environmentalism does not section off one region from another; to do so supports the “destroyer” mentality that the land is inanimate and can be endlessly exploited without consequence. By examining Ceremony’s origins in a distant place, we come to a better understanding of Silko’s global mindset, which seems to support the controversial Bering Strait theory but that more largely proposes an alternative conception of the Southwest. This geographical strategy prefigures her later novel, Almanac of the Dead. As Alex Hunt observes, “While Ceremony remains a powerful geographical recentering of Laguna Pueblo within national and global contexts, it is nevertheless a novel which for many readers affirms a feel-good sympathy for Native Americans and a shallow environmental spiritualism” (257).
Almanac of the Dead defies the “feel-good sympathy” of Silko’s first novel, but the place of Alaska connects both novels in a weird way. One clear example of Alaska’s place in Almanac of the Dead is the nameless Yupik medicine woman, who demonstrates “how storytelling and technology or myth and magic weave a web that overcomes witchery and dread” (Salyer 274). While Silko’s second novel is largely set in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, its geographical imaginary stretches across the border and into other urban and frontier regions outside of the American Southwest. Lecha is a Tucson woman who harnesses the knowledge of the old almanacs, and at the start of the novel Lecha watches the old Yupik woman, with “only a piece of weasel fur, a satellite weather map on a TV screen and the spirit energy of a story,” bring down a plane owned by a petroleum exploration company searching what they consider to be empty “frozen wastes” for natural resources to extract (159). Later, on a plane back home from Bethel, Alaska, Lecha talks to an insurance man who shows her pictures of the crash: “At first it appeared to be blank, but then she realized it was snow-covered tundra against a high overcast sky. White on white. The only figure in the field of white was that of a V partially buried in the snow,” which the insurance man reveals to be the plane’s tail (159). Through this description, Silko narrates one of the ways in which Native people subvert white exploitation by using their own technology against them. The Yupik woman quite literally turns western logic and technology upside-down at the same time that she exposes whiteness as a destructive force.

Almanac of the Dead draws attention to and comparisons across indigenous communities throughout the Americas, a very different kind of novel than Ceremony. As Adam Sol comments, “where Ceremony uplifts, Almanac overturns” (24). Yet, Alaska
connects the two novels in a weird way and signals a worldview that recognizes parallel colonial experiences and challenges the colonial logic of cultural amnesia. Silko identifies obscure connections between moments of violent imperial conquest, thus creating a nation forever haunted by the past which it refuses to recognize. As Allen argues, “The land is not really a place, separate from ourselves, where we act out the drama of our isolate destinies; the witchery makes us believe that false idea” (“The Feminine Landscape” 233-234). Silko’s novel combats this witchery by weirding the boundaries of the Southwest to make space for other national, indigenous, and environmental concerns while at the same time maintaining a very real sense of place, a strategy she replicates in Almanac of the Dead. The weird space of Alaska connects these two novels and also demonstrates Silko’s development of a more critical stance on Ceremony’s environmental imaginary. While Ceremony’s invocation of Alaska reveals the indigenous and environmental connections it shares with the American Southwest, Almanac of the Dead provides a roadmap for indigenous resistance through the use of this weird space to fight back against the continuing exploitation of the so-called “empty” Alaskan wilderness.
Chapter Four

Lucha Corpi and Rudolfo Anaya:

Chicana/o Detective Fiction Weirds the (South) West

Chicana/o detective fiction weirds the West and Southwest in ways that redefine the region, Chicana/o identity, and fiction. As Susan Baker Sotelo explains, “The detective story originated along with Romantic mid-nineteenth century Eurocentric literatures of the old and new worlds and was closely linked with national fictional narratives prevalent at the time” (2). Being heavily plot-based and not particularly concerned with profound character development, the mystery novel almost always takes place in an urban environment, with an Anglo or European heterosexual male detective who lives a fairly ordinary life but still possesses above-average intelligence. Detective stories offer a sense of nostalgia and comfort to the reader, promising both a satisfactory ending that ties up loose ends and additional adventures with the same detective (Sotelo 10). Much more seems to be at stake in Chicana/o detective fiction than mere nostalgia and conspicuous consumption, for as Mary Helen Ponce observes, “Hispanic literary critics have taken crime novels and mysteries to heart because they depict societal problems that in other genres are difficult to develop” (46). In her review essay of the genre, Ponce asserts that “Hispanic crime and mystery writers show how the law works for and against ethnic minorities” (52). Chicana/o detective fiction flourished in the late 1990s, preceding the boom in weird fiction, so it is instructive to revisit this ethnic tradition of the Southwest as precipitating popular interest in the weird West now.

As Rachel Adams argues of crime fiction, “At its most basic level, the genre registers disruptions in the social order, seeking imagined resolution to problems of
morality, injustice, and the law that may seem insurmountable outside the domain of fiction” (250-251). This ability to unsettle the status quo is attractive for many ethnic authors, but as Ralph Rodriguez explains, “One of the most plausible reasons Chicana/os did not write detective novels prior to the mid-1980s was an anxiety over the form itself” (3). Mainstream publishers already identified Chicana/o fiction as too “narrow,” but since the 1980s, Chicana/o writers have altered the detective genre to counter stereotypes and tell their own stories. Chicana/o detective fiction is different from other iterations of this genre, David Maciel argues, because of its use of folklore and myth, its “signs, symbols, behaviors, and manners” (299). Indeed, Lucha Corpi’s Gloria Damasco novels profoundly challenge the logic-driven detective genre, weirding the genre by invoking a feminist Chicana oral and spiritual tradition that is grounded in Chicana/o folklore but which also demonstrates those folkloric elements at work in the contemporary world. Carmen Flys-Junquera observes that detective fiction is “a genre that by definition is urban rather than nature-centered and realistic rather than mythic” (“Nature’s Voice” 121). Anaya’s Sonny Baca series, by contrast, dives into a mythical world of dreams and folklore traditions of rural New Mexico. For Adams, “Contemporary crime writing set along the U.S.-Mexico border exemplifies the globalization of the detective novel since it is at once regionally specific—in that it substitutes Ciudad Juarez, El Paso, Tijuana, or Calexico for the mean streets of Los Angeles and New York—and conscious of the international, and potentially planetary, implications of the crimes it represents” (251). Chicana/o writers disrupt hegemonic conceptions of the detective genre, but the genre-mixing that characterizes their work also points to alternative Southwestern histories often neglected or appropriated in mainstream narratives about the West.
Edgar Allan Poe’s “Murders in the Rue Morgue” is typically credited as the first detective story (1841). Although Poe’s work revels in the supernatural, A.E. Murch defines “the story of the supernatural” and “the detection story” as distinct, since true detective stories never allow the supernatural to go unexplained (13-14). Dorothy L. Sayers agrees and argues that the “story of detection and the story of horror form about as strong a contrast as it is possible to imagine. Their aims are, indeed, entirely opposed. The detective story seeks to leave nothing unexplained; the story of horror must always leave us guessing” (2). Chicana/o authors challenge this binary. As José E. Limón argues, these novels “are reflections not only on criminal mysteries, but also queries into the mystery of identity” (x). The supernatural seems to create a sense of magical realism, a literary tradition associated with Latin America and marked by depictions of the real alongside depictions of the fantastical (López-Calvo xx). Oftentimes, the term magical realism can obscure the actual reality Corpi and Anaya depict. Corpi and Anaya seem weird to a reader not familiar with a Chicana/o worldview, and they expand the logic-driven formula of detective fiction. As Limón suggests, Corpi and Anaya explore “the mysteries of identity,” specifically cultural hybridity and how it shapes social reality.

Rudolfo Anaya and Lucha Corpi intertwine the supernatural and the logic-driven detective plotline, lending another degree of meaning to the concept of mestiza/o identity and what Gloria Anzaldúa calls “mestiza consciousness” (79). In the detective world, there is no such thing as coincidences, since everything is connected together through logic and hard evidence. Although Corpi and Anaya’s novels still provide logical explanations for many of the mysteries they portray, they are not bound by rigid expectations of Western thought, fitting Anzaldúa’s assertion that the mestiza must
persistently “shift out of habitual formations” and move “from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and towards a more whole perspective” (101). The term mestiza/o is useful to apply to Corpi’s and Anaya’s works because it raises complex conversations about Chicana/o identity. As B. V. Olguín persuasively argues, the term “mestizaje has always been a vexed concept, complex historical reality, and problematic praxis” (31). María Saldaña-Portillo observes that while the term mestiza claims to jointly synthesize Spanish and indigenous cultures, more often than not “the erasure of the indigenous is interior to the logic of mestizaje” (407). Sheila Marie Contreras observes that the discourse of mestizaje simultaneously allows Chicana/o authors “to place themselves in an oppositional historical context and to generate discourses of social change because of that positioning” (41). In the context of detective fiction, Corpi and Anaya blend logic and the paranormal but they also run the risk of dehistoricizing and erasing indigenous people and history. Chicana/o detective novels are part fiction, part history, part logic, part supernatural. The genre is parallel to how Anzaldúa describes the mestiza, “Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else” (101). Corpi and Anaya weird the detective genre and they, in turn, re-historicize the question of indigeneity in discourses about mestizaje in order to weird the reader’s understanding of southwestern history and what constitutes the true “mystery” with which the novels contend.

Rudolfo Anaya is one of the most renowned Chicano authors to delve into detective fiction in his series about Sonny Baca, a Chicano private eye who exhibits “a combination of the TV detective Columbo and the Mexican matinee idol Pedro Infante,
bumbling and savvy but poised, too” (Davis-Undiano 127). Anaya earned a Bachelor of Arts in English and American literature from the University of New Mexico (UNM) in 1963, a Master’s degree in English in 1968, and a Master’s degree in Guidance and Counseling in 1972 (“Rudolfo” 1). Following the success of his first novel, *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972), Anaya joined the English Department as a faculty member at UNM in 1971 and taught creative writing and literature until his retirement in 1993 (1).

Throughout his long and established literary career, critics have closely aligned Anaya with the literary tradition of magical realism. As Sotelo explains, “Like *Bless Me, Ultima*, his detective novels transport the reader to a past that is infused with utopian hope contrasting with the actuality and disillusionment of the present” (9). These novels are solidly grounded in Anaya’s home state of New Mexico. Born in Pastura in 1937, Anaya was raised in Santa Rosa and later moved to Albuquerque in 1952 when he was in the eighth grade (“Rudolfo” 1). This move from a rural environment to a significantly larger city had a profound effect on Anaya and revealed to him the particularly modern issues with which his fiction continues to grapple. As Anaya relates to William Clark, his goal in writing is to “compose the Chicano worldview—the synthesis that shows our true mestizo identity—and clarify it for my community and for myself” (24). Anaya further contends, “Writing for me is a way of knowledge, and what I find illuminates my life” (24). While drafting *Bless Me, Ultima*, Anaya worked in the Albuquerque Public School system from 1963 until 1968 (“Rudolfo” 1). Although Anaya initially had great difficulty finding a publisher for *Bless Me, Ultima*, in the 1990s he signed a six-book deal with Warner books, and the Sonny Baca series constituted four of those novels (“Rudolfo” 1).
The Sonny Baca series includes *Zia Summer* (1995), *Río Grande Fall* (1996), *Shaman Winter* (1999), and *Jemez Spring* (2005). The quartet narrates the epic battle between Sonny, an up-and-coming Chicano detective in his mid-thirties, and his nemesis Raven, a trickster figure bent on destruction and chaos. The series becomes progressively weirder, with *Zia Summer* adhering to the detective genre formula and *Jemez Spring* wildly deviating from it. Margarite Fernández Olmos explains that the first half of Anaya’s quartet generally conforms to traditional detective fiction conventions in that his narrative revolves around an amateur sleuth who sets out to solve mysterious criminal activity “by means of logic and deductive reasoning” (22). Moreover, like much detective fiction, the text is interactive in the sense that Anaya “carefully reveals clues that must be detected by the sharp-witted sleuth (and also by the reader who attempts to match his or her wits with the central character’s) in order to arrive at a solution to the problem” (22).

The final two novels, *Shaman Winter* and *Jemez Spring*, also follow Sonny’s detective adventures, but they increasingly take place in realms other than the physical while still dealing with very real societal issues. As the hero of this detective series, Sonny must overcome Raven and his nefarious plans, many of which involve the threat of nuclear destruction, revealing Anaya’s ambivalence towards the nuclear industry, a major job source in the state.

In *Zia Summer*, Sonny must thwart eco-terrorist Raven bent on blowing up a Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) truck carrying nuclear waste to a facility near Carlsbad, New Mexico that will house dangerously high levels of plutonium, a particularly ironic plan since Raven’s goal is to raise awareness of the environmental destruction caused by inadequate disposal of nuclear waste. In *Río Grande Fall*, Sonny
finds Raven embroiled in drug trafficking using the highly popular Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta as cover, and in *Shaman Winter* Raven tries to destroy Sonny by destroying his family history. In *Jemez Spring*, Raven again uses the threat of nuclear destruction, this time in the form of a bomb in dangerous proximity to the Los Alamos National Laboratory. In all, Anaya uses the detective genre to bring attention to modern issues such as environmental destruction, and to retell southwestern history from a Chicano perspective. In the process, both Corpi and Anaya re-historicize the so-called Indian in discourses about mestizaje. Anaya accomplishes this critique literally by returning to and rewriting the past, often through Sonny’s dream engagement with Raven, while Corpi travels geographically into Mexico to confront issues of artifact smuggling and the ongoing commodification of indigenous bodies through her clairvoyant detective. Through their mestiza/o form of the detective novel, both authors weird the detective genre, but they also more fully engage with the concept of indigeneity, although to different ends.

Both Anaya and Corpi incorporate the history of the Southwest from a Chicana/o perspective into their respective novels. Yet where Anaya uses the local to interrogate the global and the past, Corpi is more focused on her community’s future. Lucha Corpi was born in Jáltipan, Veracruz, Mexico in 1945. She immigrated to the United States at the age of nineteen, where she earned a Bachelor of Arts in Comparative Literature from the University of California, Berkeley in 1975 (Lankford 92). Four years later, she received a Master’s degree in Comparative Literature from San Francisco State University (92). While Corpi is largely known as a poet, her detective fiction has become of recent interest to Chicana/o scholars, since she was the first Chicana to publish a mystery novel
As Corpi relates to Janet Mullaney, she was born in Mexico but identifies as a Chicana. “Living in California, I can tend toward one culture of the other, but in reality I have neither… for the Mexican I am too Chicana and for the Chicano I am too Mexican. For the ‘gringo’ I don’t even exist!” (28). Being a divorced mother, Corpi felt that she could not return home since she would be treated as “the daughter of the family again” in a patriarchal and restrictive community (28). She explains that she feels exiled from Mexico but describes her exile as “not what one would ordinarily consider political but it is really, because it has to do with the condition of women” (28). As a Chicana, Corpi aligns her work with the issues the matter most to the Chicano movement, such as migrant labor exploitation, but always from a female perspective. The Chicano movement of the 1960s and 1970s in California haunts Corpi’s detective stories, not because they are things of the past but because that violence and strife persists into the present.

Much of the scholarship on Corpi’s detective fiction concerns the ways Corpi uses the Southwest’s haunted history to perform a critical reflection on the Chicano political movement. Like many Chicana writers, Corpi’s work is involved in a “search for their own identity” that means being able to “interrogate themselves, turn past and present inside out, dig down to the deepest roots in order to get to know themselves” (Godayol 68). Corpi’s Chicana detective, Gloria Damasco, possesses what she refers to as a “dark gift” (Eulogy 123), an ability to see into the future via visions and prophetic dreams. She can also see into the past, such as when she touches an item from a deceased individual. Gloria’s gifts are key to Corpi’s weirding the normative detective genre since they call into question accepted modes of knowing, which in detective novels are almost always
strictly based on Western logic. As Inés Vassos observes, “Damasco’s clairvoyance is linked inextricably to her involvement in an investigation. It is as if her whole being were at the disposal of the case” (52). In other words, Corpi weirds accepted historical narratives by weaving in Gloria’s own affective response and conflicted mestiza identity into the narrative of neglected Chicano/a history. Corpi’s depiction of Berkeley, Oakland, and the surrounding Californian communities is a haunted landscape where, out of obligation to the dead, Gloria is driven to solve crimes while unearthing the hidden history of the Southwest.

As Cathy Steblyk explains, “A central concern of Corpi’s texts remains a doggedly political, engaged iteration of the identity of individuals who have been left for dead, and who are bound to a collective Chicana/o identity and Mexican history” (4). This obligation, of course, stems from a larger commitment to the Chicana/o community, but it becomes corporeal in the most literal sense because Gloria feels the presence of the dead, who guide her and keep her going. In short, Gloria refuses to let the past be buried. She dredges it up and performs a historical autopsy to ask: what have we gained or lost from the Movement? How does the past impact the present? How does the present impact the past? In this way, as Rodriquez explains, “Corpi’s series seeks to better understand how history and memory shape identity and to gauge their corresponding impact on political movements” (55). Four novels comprise Corpi’s Brown Angel detective series: *Eulogy for a Brown Angel* (1992), *Cactus Blood* (1995), *Black Widow’s Wardrobe* (1999), and *Death At Solstice* (2009). The series begins in the aftermath of the 1970 Chicano Moratorium and Gloria working as a speech therapist in Oakland, California, who is thrown into a murder mystery when she stumbles across the body of a young boy.
and takes on the role of an amateur detective to find the killer. In *Cactus Blood* and *Black Widow’s Wardrobe*, Gloria again excavates the past in a narrative about the United Farm Workers Strike and *La Malinche*, respectively. In *Death at Solstice*, Gloria is haunted by the reincarnation of Joaquin Murrieta in the story of a kidnapped young girl in California's Shenandoah Valley. As Rodriguez argues, the series charts Gloria-cum-Corpi’s development as a detective/writer, but it also shows how Corpi uses the present to discuss the past and the past to reimagine the future (“Cultural Memory” 138). This chapter reconsiders the weird West from the perspective of Chicana/o detective fiction, marking an alternative beginning for the weird West in the politically-charged space of the Southwest.

The character of Gloria Damasco is one of the most important interventions Corpi makes in the detective genre. As Carol Pearson explains, although Gloria deviates from the typical detective novel protagonist, initially she seems to adhere to many of these traditions: “She is presented as very bright and observant; her logic and reasoning are clearly incisive,” and she uses traditional detective methods that lead her from one tantalizing clue to another until she solves the mystery (41). Gloria’s feminism, however, is predicated on the dismissal of anything “that might put into question a woman’s intellectual ability,” including the reliance on alternative epistemologies such as her dark gift (*Eulogy* 48). However, the character of Gloria weirds the detective genre in significant ways. Prior to her detective career, Gloria worked as a speech therapist in the medical field, a profession that is, with the exception of doctors, largely female-dominated (Sotelo 12). As Manuel Ramos notes, Gloria “is a tough biscochito, but she’s no Sam Spade, not even a V.I. Warshawski” (165). And this is no shortcoming, according
to Sotelo, since “the Anglo male sleuth is typically a loner who may have a male associate, does not maintain close familial or intimate relationships, but who is very cognizant of his community’s values, habits and geography” (13). By contrast, as Francisco A. Lomeli, Teresa Marquez, and Maria Herrera-Sobek note, Chicana/o detectives typically “behave in ways that demonstrate a strong sense of identity with and close connections to their communities” (299). Vassos argues that in this way Corpi is very much inspired by feminist detective fiction, which as a genre largely “uses female protagonists and addresses women’s issues” (25). However, Corpi deviates from the bulk of this tradition by including elements from multicultural detective fiction, which “incorporates cultural and spiritual elements into the narrative,” thereby transforming the genre by “highlighting her gender as well as her ethnicity” (25), a profoundly mestiza move.

Gloria is also a mother, a facet of her personality that often conflicts with her obligation to solve her client’s crimes. In a sense, Gloria must first be released from her marital duties before fully embracing her role as a detective. While the death of her husband Dario “causes her to look beyond her conservative role of wife and mother” (Johnson 153), it also frees her from the promise she made to Dario not to pursue her detective work because it was taking her attention away from her family. In *Eulogy for a Brown Angel*, Gloria relates a phone conversation with her husband about their daughter: “‘She wants Mommy to come home with the Bugs Bunny you promised her,’ Dario told me. I sensed from his voice that he had already heard about the disturbance at the Moratorium and had been very worried, but didn’t reproach me for not calling earlier” (30). Dario passive aggressively uses his daughter’s needs to communicate his concern
regarding the possibility that Gloria’s political activism might infringe on her motherly and wifely duties. Leigh Johnson explains that Dario “claims to have been protecting her, but the text suggests that, in fact, there is fear that Gloria (or any mother who works) will become La Llorona” (153), an allusion to the Mexican-American myth that at its center displays cultural anxiety of “sexuality and the death or loss of children,” personified in what Tey Diana Rebolledo terms “the negative mother image” (63). Mothers in Corpi’s series do not take this accusation lightly, but Johnson observes that, “the very act of using this myth helps to subvert the mythic discourse surrounding it. The La Llorona myth itself is a form of violence that blames women for abandonment and loss of children. Both La Llorona and Malinche have been victims of dominant historical narratives written by and for men” (153-154). Through Gloria and the other women she encounters, Corpi challenges these misogynistic histories by shifting the narrative from a male-dominated focus to a uniquely Chicana one. This perspective weirds outdated anti-feminist Chicano rhetoric while at the same time adjusting the Western detective genre to fit modern day Chicana concerns.

Gloria’s career as a private eye begins when she discovers the dead body of a Chicano child abandoned on the sidewalk in the aftermath of the Moratorium protest. In a sense, Gloria becomes a surrogate mother who will not rest until the child has been avenged. At the age of 23, Gloria is quite young to take on the role of a private investigator. However, she is motivated by a sense of obligation to the boy, not only out of communal loyalty but also because she can sense his spirit. This anxiety about motherhood also deeply connects with her “dark gift,” which seems to be an inheritance from her maternal relatives. Judy Maloof explains that Gloria, “unlike other detectives
who are known for their fine skills in deductive methods and rational thinking, relies on her ‘irrational’ visions and dreams as tools to help her solve crimes” (7). Initially, Gloria is distrustful of these visions, but as the series continues, “We, as readers, witness the protagonist’s growing tolerance for ambivalence and experiences that have no rational, scientific explanation” (7). Part of her ambivalence stems from her own internalized sexism that dismisses anything that is not completely rational as weak. Vassos explains that, “At all costs, Damasco wants to avoid the stereotypical assumption made about women being instinctual and emotional beings” (52). Gloria is also reluctant to tell others about her physic discovery: “I suppose I felt embarrassed since I had always sought rational explanations for anything that happened to me, using intuition to support reason rather than the other way around” (Eulogy 30). As Gloria explains, “At age twenty-three I had first confronted this other self, this psychic being who insisted on my relinquishing control of a part of my life to . . . to an automatic pilot. I went through two years of denial, and then worked slowly towards knowing what ailed me” (Eulogy 123). However, as the series continues, Gloria grows to accept and rely on her visions as a unique skill that can help her solve crimes. She comes to realize “that her intellectual acumen is not diminished by her spiritual enlightenment. In short, the rational and the spiritual are not mutually exclusive” (Vassos 52). This realization extends beyond her detective work and influences her perceptions of Chicana history and cultural memory.

Corpi’s novels perform a deeply Chicana feminist act, for “it is the older generation of Chicanas and Mexicanas in these novels . . . who share these types of folk beliefs, home remedies, Mexican traditions, indigenous and mestizo cultural practices, and spirituality that enables them to see into the future” (Maloof 11). Maria Baldomar, a
curandera and character in *Cactus Blood*, “recognizes Gloria’s clairvoyance as a special gift” and “functions as a sort of spiritual mentor who encourages Gloria” (95). Her dark gift is a true power, Maria claims, since “To look into the past . . . is to look into the future. But it takes a certain kind of talent, a great gift, to see how the past will become the future” (*Cactus Blood* 94). “Just as Corpi stresses the need for her characters to face their histories in order to move forward, María connects the spiritual ability to see into the past as a window into the future” (Vassos 60). During their first meeting, Maria raises the possibility of reincarnation when she calls Gloria by her deceased friend’s name, Sabina, explaining that they both have a “radiant spirit” and gift of clairvoyance (94). Although this assertion unsettles Gloria, “Corpi does not press the issue of reincarnation but leaves the door open to the possibility” (Vassos 60). This door is later opened in *Black Widow’s Wardrobe* and in the figure of La Malinche. In this way, as Corpi’s novels progress, they also plot out a deeper history of women and mothers in Mexican and Southwestern history. The supernatural exists in these novels to shift the geography of the West toward Mexico and to retell the history of the Southwest.

While Gloria is firmly rooted in California’s Chicana history and political activism, Sonny is much more connected to a Nuevomexicano history. Rodriguez identifies Sonny as a manifestation of Anaya’s Chicano Everyman that appears in his other novels such as *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972) (*Brown Gumshoes* 106). Anaya explains that this “New World man, the New World person, takes his perspective from indigenous history and spiritual thought and mythology and relationships. The New World person is a person of synthesis, a person who is able to draw, in our case, on our Spanish roots and our native indigenous roots and become a new person, become that Mestizo with a
unique perspective” (Dick and Silvio 133). This description deviates from the classic detective who “is typically a loner who may have a male associate, does not maintain close familial or intimate relationships, but who is very cognizant of his community’s values, habits and geography” (Sotelo 13). Indeed, as Maciel, Ortiz, and Herrera-Sobek explain, “Unlike the hard-boiled or classic detectives, who represent solitary existential perspectives, Raza detectives represent a community view” (301). Like Gloria, Sonny turns to the community to help him solve crimes, which radically challenges Anglo ideologies of individualism and perceptions of Chicana/o culture. However, the tenor of their unexplainable abilities differs drastically. Gloria’s “dark gifts” are specifically connected to a matrilineal history that links Chicanas across time and space. While Corpi genders Gloria gifts, Anaya mythologizes Sonny’s as indigenous.

Sonny’s Chicano neighbor Don Eliseo initiates him into New Mexican folklore and mythology in *Zia Summer*, but it is a curandera named Lorenza Villa who helps Sonny fully step into his shamanic powers. Significantly, Lorenza is also an anthropologist who studied with Mexican and South American shamans. On the one hand, Olmos argues that through this Chicana character Anaya “redeems the twentieth-century, multicultural female healer” who “[penetrates] the male world of the brujos” to take back female power (133). But the character of Lorenza is also problematic since she serves as the sole resource of indigenous knowledge for the detective series. Through her, Sonny’s powers are tied to a nebulous second-hand indigenous history. Native characters in Anaya’s detective series are usually relegated to the background, quite literally erasing living Native peoples in favor of an indigenous mythology that shapes the mestizo Sonny. Sheila Marie Contreras identifies this rhetorical move as “Chicana/o indigenism,” which
“creates cultural narratives of Indianness that rely most prominently on mythic accounts drawn from anthropology and archaeology, and, as it most often does, myth here supplants history” (41). Anaya’s reliance on Lorenza’s curanderisma is no accident. Olmos observes, “Folk medicine is not presented in the novel as simply a time-proven curative practice; within its cultural context, it is yet another affirmation of cultural identity” (132). Sonny adopts this cultural identity from Lorenza, who continues the practice of Anaya gendering indigeneity in his novels, seen most prominently in Bless Me, Ultima with the novel’s title character. However, Lorenza is not an indigenous person, but a researcher who learns about traditional curanderisma through her study of curanderos in South America. Thus, although Anaya’s mestizo form and characters challenge generic expectations of the detective genre, they nevertheless erase the indigenous presence, instead perpetuating the rewriting of history through Sonny’s secondhand adoption of a cultural identity that he accesses through female folk magic.

In Rio Grande Fall, Lorenza first encourages Sonny to embrace his nagual, or spirit animal, a belief that “dates from pre-Columbian (prior to the arrival of Christopher Columbus) times and still exists in Mexican oral traditions” (Olmos 108). Sonny’s nagual is the coyote, a significant choice given the connotations of this name. On one level, as Flys-Junquera argues, the coyote is an apt symbol since Sonny “must learn its trickster ways in order to defeat Raven, another trickster figure who changes guises but represents evil” (“Nature’s Voice” 128). On another level, coyote also refers to the racial mixing particular to the Southwest. Sonny himself alludes to this trope when he remarks that, “All bloods ran as one in the coyotes of Nuevo Mexico” (Zia Summer 5-6). As Sotelo observes, Anaya “explores the genealogy of the Nuevo Mexicano [sic] in particular and
the contemporary Chicano in general” in order to “restore foundations of New Mexico’s
descent, the one-drop-of-blood rule that in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century United States made
anyone black who had one drop of black blood in his/her veins” (117). Moreover, while
Anaya’s mestizo elides historical and contemporary cultural tensions in New Mexico and the Southwest, and creates a dangerously narrow definition of Chicana/o identity that certainly does not apply to all Nuevomexicanos.

While Sonny and his troubling mestizo identity are at the center of the detective series, Anaya’s narrative nevertheless exhibits a palpable anxiety over identity definitions. Anaya introduces an alternative to his own shaman character with Cyber, a preteen who provides the technologically inept Sonny with invaluable Internet research in *Shaman Winter*. As Cyber explains, “‘My dad’s Chen. He’s Chinese from Shanghai,’” and his mother’s family is Diné, while his “‘great-grandfather had married a Mexican lady from Seboyeta. That was in the eighteen forties. So I’m part Navajo, part Mexican,
part Chinese” (271). Cyber suggests an alternative spatial and racial lineage in New Mexico more global and indigenous in its mestizaje. Cyber is connected with the Internet, a non-space that links seemingly disparate global cultures in a new frontier that is both everything and nothing, much like the indigenous figure of Cyber himself. But he is also identified as a New Mexican due to his birthright and thus is tied to the local. His character thus embodies Anaya’s overall goal of seeing the global in the local and of using the local to represent a universal human experience. As Sotelo observes, “Anaya’s mysteries combine the universalism of myth and romance with the Romantic concept of homeland, patria” (9). Anaya himself has explained, “I think, often, the more that region, and by this I mean not only landscape but people and customs and language and mores and mythologies, the more it infuses a work the more that work is universalized. There is no paradox to that for me” (Dick and Silvio 50). Following Rodriguez, “The curious aspect is how Sonny can come back to this unified sense of racial identity given the complex historical understanding of the settlement of New Mexico he sets forth throughout the series—and why he would want to” (Brown Gumshoes 117). While Sonny deviates in crucial ways from the typical Anglo detective, Anaya’s characterization has the unintended effect of creating a new type of singular image of the ultimate Chicano under the rhetoric of communal and cultural inclusion. Paradoxically, the character of Cyber provides a weird antidote and critique of Anaya’s limited mestizo definition, demonstrating the unstable nature of identity and providing an alternative perspective of what defines New Mexican culture and indigenous identity.

In attempting to demonstrate the universal quality of human life through regional aspects, Anaya has been criticized for promoting a nostalgic view of New Mexico by
focusing on the state’s rural and pre-contact history. Even as Anaya champions the mestizo combination of Spanish and indigenous cultural identities, his Baca series also displays an obvious longing for a pre-1846 past “before foreigners arrived and fenced in the land, a time of communal land that is now private property” (Sánchez 227). But this nostalgic idealization is undercut by the cyclical structure of these books, such that, Rosaura Sánchez claims, the nature of the conflict—Sonny/good versus Raven/evil—produces an ahistorical narrative that “leads the characters to sense that while things change, evolve, and are transformed, they also remain the same in fundamental ways” (226). However, Anaya has countered such claims by explaining, “What such critics forget is that every man’s or woman’s creative, imaginative endeavor is an act of rebellion” (Dick and Silvio 18), thus implying that narrating these events also fundamentally changes them. Sonny echoes Anaya’s argument when he considers in Zia Summer that, “History did not happen and then go away for the people of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, it festered and grew into the bones, blood and soul. It stayed to inhabit the memory, and so the people learned to accommodate the ghosts of the past. People here lived and breathed history. It was all around them” (168). Sonny himself is a personification of New Mexico’s landscape and history; his name is a clear reference to the sun, also known as the zia in New Mexico, a contested symbol and emblem the state appropriated from the Zia Pueblo, which portrays a circle comprised of four radiating lines that represent the four elements and four seasons, as seen on the New Mexico state flag. Anaya replicates the zia symbol by writing four novels that comprise the series.

In Zia Summer, the symbol becomes a tell-tale sign of Raven’s murders, etched into the body of Sonny’s cousin, a character aptly named Gloria. In this way, Anaya
appropriates an appropriated symbol to venture into the mystery of New Mexico history through the bloodless body of Sonny’s first cousin and, as it turns out, his first sexual partner. In many ways, Gloria is a modern-day La Malinche who marries the enemy and pays a steep price for her social and sexual transgressions. Gloria’s death also embodies the longing to return to a pre-conquest past, which ironically would mean that Sonny’s mestizo heritage would never come to pass. Thus Anaya’s complicated and at times contradicting portrayal of the region is gendered as female, feminine, and dead from the start. Anaya’s view of history carries complex signifiers that complicate the novel’s reclamation of Chicana/o history.

The Baca series and Corpi’s Damasco series converse with and counter each other through the image of La Malinche, a highly contested figure who was a young Nahuatl girl sold into slavery by her mother. Referred to as Malintzin by Mexico’s indigenous people, she was presented as a gift to Hernán Cortés and later became his mistress and translator (Rebolledo 61). As Tey Diana Rebolledo explains, “Her name became so closely identified with that of the conqueror (and his with hers) that in Mexico, by the twentieth century, the word ‘Malinche’ or ‘Malinchista’ became synonymous with a person who betrays her or his country” (62). Chicana feminists reclaimed La Malinche in the mid-twentieth century, and their writings portray her not “as the passive victim of rape and conquest but instead believe her to be a woman who had and made choices” (64). For Anaya, Gloria is another figuration of La Malinche that reincarnates the very passive body that Chicanas refute, but Corpi refigures this passivity and presents an alternative narrative of Mexico’s indigenous mother.
Indeed, Corpi herself has said that La Malinche is “the first woman in the history of Mexico who decided about her own life” (Mullaney 30). Ramos concurs that this image of La Malinche is the one Corpi invokes in her narrative since, in her reincarnated form, she “is the target of betrayal, not its purveyor, and she definitely is not her husband’s victim” (164-165). Corpi also invokes and revises the figure of La Llorona, who is often linked with La Malinche. La Llorona, a spectral weeping woman, haunts riverbanks and arroyos in search of her murdered children, “a tale used for centuries by madres and abuelitas to instill good behavior in unruly children” (Ramos 164). In Corpi’s novel, La Llorona is exonerated for her crimes: in her reworking, “the children are the possible murderers of their mother, and it is they who must suffer the consequences” (164-165). This dual reclamation is fitting since, as Robelledo explains, “In folklore, the images and mythology of La Llorona and La Malinche merge until in many areas they are transformed into a unitary figure. The image is a negative one, tied up in some vague way with sexuality and the death or loss of children: the negative mother image” (63). Corpi’s reclamation of maligned female figures is weird enough since it challenges patriarchal Chicano values, but Corpi takes this a step further by literally reincarnating La Malinche into the present day. In this way, La Malinche is no longer an abstract historical figure, but a flesh and blood character who stands alongside the mestiza Gloria and whose weird perspective must be acknowledged. Like Gloria, Corpi sees into the past and connects it with the present, thereby rewriting conventional misogynistic narratives while simultaneously critiquing colonial violence that has been kept alive in the present. As with Anzaldúa’s mestiza, Corpi conflates the past and the present in a powerful literary and political reclamation of the detective genre. But in Corpi’s narrative, the female
indigenous is not silent or dead but in the present life of Licia Román Lecuona and the ongoing manifestations of colonialism.

Both Anaya and Corpi use the detective genre in order to reveal the silent history of Chicana/os in the Southwest. Not only do their Chicano/a sleuths defy normative portrayals of detective novel private eyes, but they also embed history within folklore and curanderisima traditions to challenge the rationale-driven genre. Corpi also uses the present to discuss the past and the past to discuss the future, personified in the uncanny doubling of Licia/La Malinche in *Black Widow’s Wardrobe*. The plot of *Black Widow’s Wardrobe* focuses on Licia Román Lecuona, a woman who kills her husband after suffering years of domestic abuse. Although she is pregnant at the time, she is sentenced to prison and is later led to believe that her twin babies died soon after their birth. After speaking with a curandera and practicing past life regression, Licia, originally born in the borough of Coyoacán in Mexico City, believes herself to be the reincarnation of La Malinche, or as Corpi refers to her, “Malintzin Tenepal” (57). Licia appears to be the victim of police brutality the first time Gloria meets her when she is stabbed by a person in a San Francisco police uniform who also take on the form of sixteenth-century Spanish conquistadores, at least in Gloria’s mind. In this way, Corpi creates a character whose twentieth-century experiences mirror those of a woman from the colonial past, indicating how this past still haunts the present in ways that must be recognized if they are to be addressed. Johnson sees Corpi drawing connections between “state violence and hemispheric violence” in a narrative about domestic violence, which “is the impetus for Gloria’s investigation” (166).
Through the act of reclaiming maligned female archetypes, Corpi also empowers women through research. While Gloria is occupied with finding Licia’s would-be murderer, her mother and her mother’s friend Pita are tasked with the job of researching La Malinche, “an interesting development on the detective novel tradition,” since “dos abuelitas appear in the role of the private investigator in this novel” (Pearson 47). In one instance, when Gloria’s mother provides her with “two old volumes in which she had bookmarked some passages with, respectively, a comb, a nail file, a pencil, and a variety of hairpins” (Corpi 72), “Corpi gives readers a compelling visual of women inserting themselves into narrative and thus history, creating a Chicana feminist fold where gendered, everyday objects meet the textual traces of historically patriarchal oppression” (López 162). Moreover, Gloria’s former occupation as a speech therapist mirrors La Malinche’s aptitude as a translator, signaling how Chicanas continue to play with and subvert linguistic conventions. As Rebolledo explains, “Because Chicana writers identify with the act of interpretation as they consciously shift from one language and culture to another, and because in the power structure they always have to consider their relation to the dominant culture, it is not surprising that many feel closely aligned with the figure of La Malinche” (64). Pearson observes that in Black Widow’s Wardrobe, “Corpi uses a chorus of voices to tell Malinche’s history, each contributing a different piece of the puzzle, a different viewpoint, each having a different relationship with Malinche and/or Licia” (46). Some of these viewpoints come from the Spanish chronicler Bernal Diaz and Mexican philosopher Octavio Paz, but the most significant intellectual has been Norma Alarcón, “who has written groundbreaking academic articles revising the figure of La Malinche” (Maloof 4). Much like Alarcón and other Chicana feminists, Corpi reclaims
La Malinche and reveals a Chicana feminist history of the Southwest in her fictional novels.

One way of explicating the differing ways Corpi and Anaya weird Southwestern history is by looking into the character of Gloria in each novel. Through their depiction of these women, Corpi and Anaya are able to examine the past, but while Anaya’s exploration is regional, Corpi’s is transnational. As stated earlier, Anaya’s Gloria stands in as a modern-day La Malinche who is punished for her sexual and social transgressions, whereas Corpi redeems and humanizes Licia. Although she appears only briefly in the beginning of Zia Summer, Gloria’s body stands in for New Mexico itself, with the zia symbol carved into her navel. “El ombligo,” Sonny muses, “There was something very special about the ombligo. It was the connection to the mother” (34). Later, in Río Grande Fall, Sonny has a vision of diving into a lake, but before doing so Gloria’s image appears reflected in the water. “‘Gloria became the passage,’” Rita observes, and Sonny agrees, saying that “Entering Gloria was a journey into Mother Earth, the world of spirits” (38). Even so, Gloria’s body is still drained of its life-blood, separating “soul from flesh” (32). In the context of the novel’s environmental message, Gloria’s bloodless body represents the exploitation of regional resources that Anaya draws attention to throughout the series. However, her influence is inescapable since, upon viewing her body, Sonny feels that he has been possessed and that his “soul has been inhabited by Gloria’s ghost” (2), leading him to explore the more spiritual aspects of his identity through his healing sessions with Lorenza and his dream adventures with don Eliseo. In this way, Anaya indicates how the history of New Mexico haunts Sonny and can only be cured by his participation in the “old ways” of his Nuevomexicano culture.
If Anaya’s Gloria character is a modern-day New Mexican Malinche, then her husband, Frank Dominic, stands in for a modern-day Hernán Cortés, a ruthless businessman embroiled in a cutthroat mayoral campaign. Marriage to Gloria improves Dominic’s political standing because of her family’s connection to the state’s Spanish colonial history. Sonny believes that Dominic only married Gloria because he “yearned to be connected to royalty, anything that had to do with the Spanish blue blood of the first conquistadores,” including Gloria Dominguez, whose “family had been in the Río Grande valley since the first conquest of New Mexico, and had returned with de Vargas after the 1680 Indian Pueblo revolt to resettle in the Albuquerque area” (Zia Summer 14). As Sonny remarks, “Dominic was a man driven to be not only the mayor of the city, he also wanted to be the new duke of Alburquerque” (13). Here, Anaya invokes the title of his first mystery novel, Alburquerque (1992), which is not part of the Sonny Baca series but which is crucial to understanding the author’s regional reclamation. In all of his mystery novels, Anaya returns to the Spanish conquest of New Mexico in order to draw attention to a neo-colonial exploitation of native New Mexico. Gloria’s extramarital affair with the Japanese businessman Morino—not to mention, her pregnancy—indicates a suspicion of global influences while it also acknowledges the similarities between cultures, much like Cyber in Shaman Winter. Unlike Cyber, however, Gloria must suffer for her sexual transgressions. Flys-Junquera observes, “Sonny is forced to take into account the factors of the global political economy that intrude on his life and moreover, on the crimes that are committed” (“Rudolfo Anaya’s” 167). Anaya’s insular perspective regionalizes the global implications of his Gloria/La Malinche character.
While Anaya’s Gloria is lifeless and her body interpreted by men, Corpi represents La Malinche as a woman with agency, a woman who serves as a connection between cultures. Sonny travels to Juarez, Mexico, in *Río Grande Fall*, but the Chicano detective’s stay is brief and the setting does not factor into his narrative complexity. By contrast, Corpi returns to Mexico to reclaim and resist the pathological figure of La Malinche, both in the Mexican national imaginary and in the Southwestern Chicano imaginary. As Mexican philosopher Octavio Paz writes, “To the inhabitants of New York, Paris, or London, death is a word that is never uttered because it burns the lips. The Mexican, on the other hand, frequents it, mocks it, caresses it, sleeps with it, entertains it; it is one of his favorite playthings and his most enduring love” (81). It is fitting that Gloria’s first encounter with Licia occurs during a Día de Los Muertos parade, as this Mexican celebration marks a time when the dead return to visit the living, but it also reflects the persistence of indigenous practices in Mexico, despite and perhaps because of Spanish colonization. Reference to the Día de Los Muertos festival forcefully demonstrates that death is a cultural experience, subverting Western logic again and opting instead for what the mainstream considers alternative cultural knowledge. As Caitlin Doughty contends, “In the past forty years, *Día de Muertos* has come to represent popular culture, tourist culture, and protest culture throughout Mexico. And Mexico itself is viewed as a world leader in practicing engaged, public grief” (81). Corpi’s setting thus draws cultural connections that expand the history of the Southwest into a trans-national engagement with the region’s history.

Gloria spies Licia at the Día de Muertos parade wearing a dress “so white it glowed in the darkness” (*Black Widow’s* 6). Gloria’s mother remarks “*Es la llorona,*” to
which Gloria replies, “It can’t be La Llorona, Mother. She didn’t kill her children. She only killed her husband” (6). When Gloria’s curiosity compels her to follow Licia, she witnesses Licia’s attack by men on horseback who she initially believes to be San Francisco policemen. As the figures approach, Gloria “realized that they were not wearing San Francisco police uniforms. They were dressed as conquistadors. It was as if we had been caught in a time warp” (7). Later, it is revealed that the men were neither police nor conquistadores but Licia’s estranged son who despises her for killing his father. In this way, it is not Licia/La Malinche/La Llorona who kills her children but the very opposite. For Corpi, this familial tension is transposed on a national scale via the novel’s subplot, which involves an American professor who smuggles pre-Columbian artifacts from Mexico, justifying his crime by arguing, “You Mexicans—Chicanos—you are so ignorant. You don’t value what you have’” (80). Gloria reluctantly agrees, noting that people all-too-often forget their rich cultural past. Yet Corpi views this “ignorance” not as a personal failure but as being symptomatic of larger identity tensions for Chicanas/os. As Gloria’s partner Dora, also a Chicana investigator, explains to their Mexican guide, “We Chicanos are like the abandoned children of divorced cultures. We are forever longing to be loved by an absent neglectful parent—Mexico—and also to be truly accepted by the other parent—the United States. We want bicultural harmony. We need it to survive. We struggle to achieve it. That struggle keeps us alive’” (147-148).

Corpi presents La Malinche from both a personal and transnational perspective that weirdly illustrates the tensions that permeate history on both sides of the border, making her detective novels distinctly mestiza in the ways they cross borders, both literally and generically.
While Gloria Damasco is well-versed in the political history of the Chicano Movement and culture, Anaya’s Sonny is a good-natured Chicano Everyman “too distracted by modern life and culture, and with only a weak sense of his Chicano heritage, either Aztlan or the New World” (Davis-Undiano 134-135). Anaya has often commented that in both high school and college, his instructors often failed to discuss the rich history of the Nuevomexicano community that infuses the city of Albuquerque. As a result, part of the goal of his detective fiction is to educate the public about this neglected history. Anaya begins this lesson with Sonny himself, specifically by bringing the past to life via historical flashbacks—or as Gloria Damasco calls them, “time warps” (Black Widow’s 7). For Corpi, the past interferes with the present, but in Anaya’s work the present interferes with the past. La Malinche becomes more than a symbol for Corpi, who confuses the past and the present in order to call attention to old and new forms of colonization. Anaya also calls attention to forgotten histories, like in Shaman Winter where Raven time travels to “steal” Sonny’s ancestral grandmothers, destroy his bloodline, and erase history. Yet Corpi does not wish to preserve or erase history. In many ways, Corpi illustrates the futility of either approach for women on either side of the border. La Malinche, in Corpi’s hands, connects Mexico to the Southwest and reimagines the contours of Anaya’s regional history, mainstream detective fiction, and the weird West.
Chapter Five

“Those People Are Still Probably Mad As Hell”: Slavery and Violence in Anna Lee Walters and Leslie Marmon Silko

My study demonstrates how ethnic and women writers level cultural critiques of race, gender, and place that weird the West and Southwest. As I discuss in the first chapter, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Dorothy Scarborough use the landscape—via the wistaria vine and the wind—to weird and question gender norms and local color writing. In my second chapter, I explore Ishmael Reed’s jarring performances of Black masculinity and sexual identity that, in the process, pathologize homosexuality. Chapter Three looks at the way Leslie Marmon Silko’s Ceremony calls the reader’s attention to comparative frontier spaces—the American Southwest and Alaska—and the ongoing legacy of colonialism. In my fourth chapter, I examine how Lucha Corpi and Rudolfo Anaya use the mystery novel genre to question the erasure of Chicana/o history in the Southwest. This last chapter examines two Native American writers whose work weirds the history and geography of the American Southwest. Anna Lee Walters’ Ghost Singer: A Novel (1988) is set in the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History and was written prior to the passage of the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). Meanwhile, Leslie Marmon Silko’s The Almanac of the Dead: A Novel (1991) challenges expectations of the Native American novel that Ceremony helped to create. Walters and Silko especially weird two material objects that Western society holds dear—the museum and the map—through “ghostly” narrative techniques that uncover the critical project of indigenous re-writing/righting of the Southwestern past.
Walters uses the supernatural in order to reveal the modern horrors of westward expansion that continue to haunt the Americas. As Rebecca Tillett observes, “the monstrous is situated within the power and agendas of academia; within the construction of ‘national’ history through the silencing of minority voices, and the consequent power and authority assumed by ‘legitimate’ or legitimating historians” (“‘Resting’” 86). However, the novel also engages with the hidden history of the slave trade of North American tribes, specifically the enslavement of Diné/Navajo by Spanish and Mexican colonizers. The history of slavery in New Mexico shapes the present narrative and haunts intertribal cooperation and community. Much of the novel is set in the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C. where indigenous spirits haunt white anthropologists. Meanwhile, the absence of tribal artifacts and the missing body parts of their ancestors haunt indigenous communities back home in Oklahoma and New Mexico. Walters is a Pawnee and Otoe-Missouria tribal member, born on September 9, 1946, in Pawnee, Oklahoma, and she later took a job at Diné College, where she continues to work today in Tsaile, Arizona. In *Talking Indian* (1992), she writes, “Born into two tribal cultures which have existed for millennia without written language, the spoken word held me in the mystical and intimate way it has touched others who come from similar societies whose literature is oral” (11). In *Ghost Singer*, Walters weaves together the Native American landscapes with which she is most familiar—Oklahoma and New Mexico—to critique the hegemonic space of the nation’s Capital and its collection of Native American artifacts at the Smithsonian.

*Ghost Singer* was published one year before the National Museum of the American Indian Act and just two years before the passing of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). Jack Trope and Walter Echo-Hawk,
two indigenous activists who assisted in the negotiation of NAGPRA, assert this
“legislation culminates decades of struggle by Native American tribal governments and
people to protect against grave desecration, to repatriate thousands of dead relatives or
ancestors, and to retrieve stolen or improperly acquired religious and cultural property
back to Native owners” (36). NAGPRA, and the National Museum of the American
Indian Act that came before it, was supposed to provide “nationwide repatriation
standards and procedures for the return of Native remains and certain protected materials
from federal agencies and federally funded institutions” (37). Prior to the passage of this
act, Native remains could be held by museums and other academic institutions, despite
indigenous claims to them as sacred. D.S. Pensley writes, “By the late 1980s it was
estimated that museums, federal agencies, educational institutions, and private collectors
held between three hundred thousand and 2.5 million dead Native bodies in addition to
millions of funerary, ceremonial, and cultural objects” (43). These bodies and objects
“were obtained by soldiers, government agents, pothunters, private citizens, museum-
collecting crews, and scientists in the name of profit, entertainment, science, or
development” (Trope and Eco-Hawk 40). Trope and Eco-Hawk observe, “The practice is
so widespread that virtually every Indian tribe or Native group in the country has been
affected by non-Indian grave looting” (39). For this reason, Lee Schweninger argues that

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8 Trope and Eco-Hawk argue that “NAGPRA is unique legislation because it is the first time that
the Federal Government and non-Indian institutions must consider what is sacred from an Indian
perspective” (76), but D.S. Pensley disagrees. “Not only does NAGPRA fail to articulate its own history,
but in emphasizing the antiquity of Native Americans, it sets even contemporaneous Indians inextricably in
the past” (48).
Walters’s novel “contends that the very existence of such museum collections makes manifest the colonial attitudes of European Americans toward Native Americans” (184). The novel indicates the problematic nature of these hidden collections and the anthropological disavowal of past colonial violence.

Walters was raised by her Pawnee grandmother and grandfather until she was sent to boarding school out of economic necessity, which brought with it her first experiences with racism. Walters recalls that in the fifth grade she watched her best friend stand up in class one day and proclaim, “‘If God didn’t want us white people to conquer the Indians, he would not have let it happen,’” without rebuke from their teacher (Talking Indian 210). Walters frequently ran away from home to avoid going back to school (210). In 1963 she enrolled in the newly-opened Institute of American Indian Art, a tribal college in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where she met her future husband (Talking Indian 216). While she enjoyed living in Santa Fe, she was conscious of its dark past, learning that Pawnee slaves were once bought and sold in that very city (216). She later worked as a library technician at the Institute from 1968-1974, then at the Navajo Community College developing curriculum and serving as the Director of Public Information and Relations and Director of the Navajo Community College Press (Ruppert 528). She attended Goddard College in Plainfield, Vermont, where she earned her B.A. and her M.A. in Creative Writing (528). Extremely prolific, Walters has authored eight books, ranging from non-fiction to a children’s book, and her work is featured in almost twenty anthologies and textbooks about indigenous people and cultures (528). Ghost Singer is arguably her most well-known work and is based in part on her experience working in the National Anthropological Archives at the Smithsonian Institution (Tillett, “‘Resting’”

As its title implies, *Ghost Singer* presents itself as an indigenous ghost story. Florian Tatschner observes that “the novel, at first sight, intentionally works as an instance of the established ghost story genre conforming to the discourse of the literary archive,” but ultimately it sneaks “a spectral Native presence into discourse” (13). Walters’ story centers around the Smithsonian Archives in Washington, D.C. between 1968-1969. Over the past eighteen months, there have been three suicides by white archivists and historians working within its walls. Early on, the reader is introduced to Jean Wurly, who works in the uppermost floor of the museum that houses a special collection hidden away from the public and at the center of these spectral occurrences. She confides in her brother, David Drake, “‘there are Indians there. I’ve seen them’” (5). Among these ghostly Native figures in the museum is the Ghost Singer, who is full of rage and searching for something within the archives. The next day, Jean dies in a fall from the stairs leading to the archives in what is deemed a suicide, which sparks the novel’s main events. The novel follows numerous characters both within and without the museum whose interconnected storylines unfold as the novel progresses. These include three white historians: David Drake, who is writing what he believes is the “first” definitive history of the Diné, Geoffrey Newsome and Donald Evans, who both work in the Smithsonian archives. Among the Native characters, there are Jonnie Navajo, David’s main informant and “a singer, a medicine man, and a practitioner of half a dozen
ceremonies” (181), his grandson Willie Begay, and Russell Tallman and George Daylight, two tribal officials visiting D.C.

The novel weirds the academic space of the museum by pushing the reader to adopt a Native worldview that reveals the evil of collecting the dead as artifacts. D.S. Pensley notes, “tribes such as the Apache and Pawnee believe that anyone who disturbs a grave is an evil, profane, and demented individual who intends to use the dead as a tool to harm the living” (52). Similarly, the Diné believe that individuals with an interest in the dead are more inclined to witchcraft (Burnham 229). In a conversation with George, Donald insists, “‘these objects and items stored up here are from dead cultures, George, dead! When will you people wake up to this realization? There’s no point in trying to revive the dead. Life can’t be breathed into these things’” (Walters, Ghost Singer 110). George replies, “‘The cultures who created these items ain’t dead simply because you’re blind to them and deem them so! These cultures manifest themselves differently now, that’s all’” (112). He continues saying, “‘The people who created these things exist—they’re still here!’” (112). The two viewpoints characterize the racial divide amongst the rest of the characters, with the whites relegating Native people to the past and the Native characters challenging this ignorant assumption. This conversation also implicates Western society in general. Following Tatschner, “In Ghost Singer, the structure of the museum functions as an institutionalized spatial metaphor for a national archival logic and a particularly Western lens for looking at the Other” (3). It also weirds the entire Western worldview that justifies its actions as being done in the name of scientific advancement.
Donald and Geoffrey are not unbiased scientists but are deeply implicated in the colonial past they study. As Russell tells his Diné friend Willie, “‘It’s a hell of a thing, the ideas they had ‘bout ‘red Indians.’ It's enough to scare the crap out of you. What's even more spooky is that people acted on these ideas, made decisions based on them, decisions that still affect us guys. Willie, you and me’s lucky even to be sitting around here at all’” (Walters 72). When Willie tells him of the Native scalp he finds in the archives, George replies “‘Yeah? But it ain’t too surprising. There’s a savagery here alright, no doubt ‘bout it. It’s always been here. We perpetuate it. Willie, right now, it’s probably over in Saigon. They’re probably taking ears and scalps over there’” (73). His comment reminds the reader of the ongoing project of colonialism perpetrated by the United States government outside of North America and in the Pacific West and links scientists in the U.S.’s imperial project, in the shadows if not the frontlines.

The real ghost story begins, however, more than a hundred years prior with the story of Red Lady, a Diné woman living in the Four Corners region in the early nineteenth-century New Mexico. The insertion of Red Lady’s story at the beginning of the text introduces a mystery in the novel: who stole Red Lady and her daughter, and will they ever return to their home? In the beginning, a mixed band of Mexican and Native American slave traders kidnap Red Lady and one of her twin daughters. The other daughter is saved by Red Lady’s father, White Sheep, who hides the child during the attack. Although Red Lady is eventually recovered by her family, she is never the same, and the family never succeeds in locating Red Lady’s lost child. The next chapter jumps to August, 1968, in Washington, D.C., with Jean Wurly in the national archives. By including the story of Red Lady’s kidnapping at the beginning of the text, the novel does
not conform to temporal narrative expectations. Moreover, form challenges the reader to question whether or not conditions have changed since the late 1800s. Jonnie Navajo explains, “‘Like the other things that have been hauled away from us—the pottery, the mummies, the medicine bundles—she was taken too. In a sense, even our history has been taken away. I guess we’ll never know what happened to her’” (247). This mystery surrounding the fate of Red Lady’s lost child is deeply troubling to Jonnie Navajo, since the Diné have a complex kinship system that is founded upon one’s knowing their ancestors (Carroll and Walters 66). Therefore, this loss of an ancestor means a gap in knowledge of oneself as well as one’s community, indicating that “the Navajo Nation itself is incomplete without knowledge of the stolen grandmother” (Reid 77).

Through the story of Red Lady, Walters also signals a larger loss among the Diné, and its forced removal from the homeland in 1864, when over nine thousand Diné were forced on what they called the “Long Walk to Hwéeldi,” a three week journey across almost three hundred miles “with one third never returning to Navajo country again” (Talking Indian 179). Along the way, “many children were stolen by New Mexican slave raiders while the army either ignored this or were helpless to stop it” and “the buzzards and coyotes followed . . . because death was so rampant among them” (179). On a visit to Fort Sumner, Walters observed that the monument that stands there now is “not a monument to the Navajo people, but a monument to the Fort Sumner soldiers” (Carroll and Walters 65). Even more disturbing, the inscription on this monument is a New Mexican Volunteers Marching Song, which also serves as the epigraph in Ghost Singer,
that praises the soldier’s hunt for “Jonny Navajo.” When Walters inquired where she could find the graves of the Diné who died while imprisoned at Fort Sumner, she found that there was no such record marking their graves (Carroll and Walters 64). Without a monument, the historical suffering of the hundreds of Diné who died while imprisoned by the United States government goes erased. Law scholar Julia Cryne notes, “It is commonplace belief across multiple Native American groups that the disturbance of the dead (either by desecration or grave-robbing) forces the spirits of those individuals to wander without rest” (101). In this way, both the living and the dead continue to suffer with their graves still hidden and vulnerable to desecration.

A popular trope in weird fiction and American horror writing is that of a white American family discovering that their dream house is built upon a haunted Native burial ground. While these narratives indicate past colonial violence through their acknowledgment of preexisting indigenous land claims, they often overlook the continuation of that colonialism to the present day. In The National Uncanny: Indian Ghosts and American Subjects, Renée Berglund argues that “in the minds of white men, Native American ghosts continue to create political amnesia and a nationalist imaginary that locates all native people within the white American self, and authorizes the theft of native land” (169). Some popular examples of these texts include Stephen King’s Pet Sematary (1983), Stanley Kubrick’s film adaptation of King’s The Shining (1980), and Jay Anson’s The Amityville Horror (1977). Gesa Mackenthun argues that the former two

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9 Since Walters’ visit, there has since been a memorial established in June 2005, which Jennifer Denetdale describes in Reclaiming Diné History: The Legacies of Navajo Chief Manuelito and Juanita (78).
works share a “strategy of translating a colonial or imperial conflict into a conflict within the family itself, or of dramatizing it as a primeval ordeal between the American family and unexplained evil forces” (94). Either way, Berglund argues, “when we focus on Indian ghosts, we risk forgetting the fact that many survived” (2-3). Additionally, we forget the ghosts themselves since they serve as a faceless source of evil that a white family must overcome. Walters seems to be playing on these common themes in her own work, playing on the ghost story trope and turning it around to show that the dead are more than just the object of a ghost story. Tillett observes that “the horror of the dead is amplified by their role as witness to the continued reverberations of those histories in Federal Indian policy, in the Federal Indian relationship, and in the contemporary realities of Native life in the United States” (“‘Resting’” 103). However, Walters also demonstrates that Native Americans continue to thrive and honor their tribal histories. Walters thus weirds the concept of Native haunting by tilting it away from an Anglo-European perspective and centering the lives of indigenous peoples in both the past and the present.

The presence of these ghosts is not comforting to the Native characters in the novel. In fact, Jonnie Navajo’s grandson Willie Begay is nearly driven mad by his visions of the dead. However, Jonnie Navajo intervenes and saves his nephew by performing a Navajo curing ceremony in Willie’s hospital room in Washington, D.C. In this instance, Willie is literally saved through reconnection with his family, but this reconnection is made difficult by his distance from home. Willie is a tribal ancestor and kin member of Red Lady’s clan, but he also lives in Washington, D.C., and conducts research as a student in the national archives at a remove from his tribal homeland. His haunting
begins while he is examining Navajo materials in the archives and a museum curator brings in new materials, among which Willie finds “a complete scalp, with gray hair, and both ears attached to it” that had been “purchased by a well-known photographer passing through the Southwest” at the turn of the twentieth century (45). Willie is horrified at his unexpected encounter with death, not only because he did not expect such a morbid artifact to exist in the museum collection, let alone be brought to him, but also because of a tribal taboo that prohibits interaction with dead bodies or items from a dead person. This horror is made manifest several days later in the same archival space while he is talking with his Native friend, George, who tells Willie about the body of a mummified woman being held in the upstairs archives. While George is speaking, Willie is distracted by the entrance of a large man, the Ghost Singer, who begins to shout and pound tables, but whose presence is not seen by anyone else, including George. As Willie looks around the room in shock, the scene changes. The other (presumably non-Native) patrons look up at him: “They wore no expressions on their faces, only their eyes were clear little lights. They looked like demons, their terrible eyes lit the room and hurt Willie like stinging cactus needles when they looked at him” (75). Tatschner explains that Willie takes on “the archival gaze fixed upon the other in the faces of the scholars around him” (12). But this is also a moment in the text when a character literally takes on a weird perspective that alters the way he views the universe.

When the scene shifts, Willie’s perception also shifts. Prior to this moment, Willie was intellectually aware of the generally dehumanizing attitude of Western anthropology towards Native peoples, but it is not until he takes on the Ghost Singer’s perspective that he truly experiences it for himself. The other patrons stare and fix him in place, their gaze
made manifest in its dispassionate view of Native people, which Willie brings to bare. Through this ghostly perspective, Willie experiences firsthand how researchers objectify Native peoples with their supposedly unbiased anthropological gaze, a process that also allowed for the dismissal and forgetting of Native slavery that characters such as Maria experience.

The descendants of Diné slaves in the Southwest might never discover what really happened to their many lost clan members, creating an unsolvable mystery that the novel never fully resolves. The lack of record is likely not an oversight, for as Walters’ David Drake notes, “‘without records, there is no history’” (198). Jennifer Denetdale writes that many twentieth-century historians continue to disregard Diné oral history telling of the horrors of Hwéeldi and disclaiming the idea that they had a “choice” to go (76). As Tillett explains, “From the viewpoint of many contemporary Native peoples in the United States, the agenda of anthropology is inextricable from the imperial agenda of the nation state” (“‘Resting’” 97). The narrative of Red Lady’s kidnapping thus opens up a history of slavery amongst tribal people. As Jonnie Navajo states, “I’m afraid that our people are still being bought and sold, even though they are dead—and have been dead for hundreds of years! Even worse, some of the people are not whole. They remain in bits and pieces, and yet these pieces are also being traded, bought, and sold, like so many sheep! When does it stop?” (207). This legacy of Native slavery haunts the Native characters, but has largely been erased or forgotten by Anglo-Europeans. “Outside the familiar, painful tale of African American slavery,” Ned Blackhawk explains, “borderlands Indian slavery still remains a narrative of pain” (89). In Ghost Singer, David Drake plans to write the “first” history of the Navajo slave trade, for “no historian had given it serious treatment, and the
few references to it by historians were casual and doubtful, skipping over it carelessly” (Walters 78). Yet even Drake suffers from his own biases and believes he is best suited to tell a Navajo history, even after Jonnie Navajo discontinues working with him. In the end, there is no happy resolution. The novel uncovers the identity of Red Lady’s captive daughter, but Jonnie Navajo, Willie Begay, and even David Drake remain unaware of her whereabouts.

Walters takes a more intimate and woman-centered look at the effects of borderland slavery with the story of Red Lady’s daughter, Maria, the stolen twin baby. Near the beginning of the novel, readers are introduced to the character Anita at a pivotal moment in her life. Anita’s mother Rosa has just passed away, but her mother’s dying words about an Indian woman named Maria who cared for her inspire Anita to uncover the mystery of Maria’s story. In searching for answers about her family history, Anita visits Beth, a white woman who knew Maria. Beth explains that Maria was, in fact, Rosa’s mother. Moreover, Beth relates that Maria always held the belief that she was Navajo, but without tangible proof to Beth’s family, “she quieted and didn’t pursue her claim” (93). At first, Beth claims that Maria was “more or less adopted” into her family by her great-great-grandfather, however, she also confesses that Maria was actually “‘both a servant and a member of the family’” purchased from her previous home (92). “‘It wasn’t all bad,’” Beth explains, “‘She became one of the family and was dearly loved by everyone’” (92). However, Beth further undermines her assertion when she reveals that the family arranged for Maria’s marriage to another Diné slave (93). On a visit to the family cemetery, Anita discovers that Maria’s grave lies outside the “crumbling walls” protecting the rest of the family, further cementing the understanding that Diné ancestors
are excluded from the family circle as outsiders, even in death (95). In the end, Anita remains a mystery to her male ancestors looking for her, even with the assistance of David Drake, who only foments the mystery even further.

Walters illustrates how men of all sorts and colors participated in the slave trade of the Southwestern borderlands, long before James Brooks’ *Captives and Cousins: Slavery, Kinship, and Community in the Southwest Borderlands* (2002). Brooks brings attention to the slavery and human trafficking that began during New Spain’s dominion over what is today the Southwestern borderlands, and he argues that it resulted in “an assimilation of violence into mutually productive exchange relations” (17). *Ghost Singer* also implicates the museum and Anglo-European culture, more generally, by uncovering the difficulty of retelling María’s history, three-times removed from her tribal origin.

The clearing of Native American land in the name of Manifest Destiny, the theft and trafficking of human bodies in history, and the exploitative practice of western anthropology leave no clear resolution to the end of *Ghost Singer*: the ghosts are never banished, the Ghost Singer’s desires are never revealed, and the suicides will continue. Indeed, Walters confounds any hope of a neat resolution from the start. When Russell goes to Pawnee tribal elders Wilbur and Anna Snake for help, Wilbur replies, “‘The first thing to learn is that there ain’t nothing to do ‘bout the whole thing. Accept it. It’s bigger than anyone dreams’” (68). While Russell refuses to leave the situation alone, he eventually comes to the realization that Wilbur is right. At the end of the novel, all the Native characters leave or are in the process of leaving D.C., while the “ghosts in the museum remain spectrally present to testify to the ongoing consequences of slave raids
and termination policies initiated by the militant epistemology of the Conquest” (Tatschner 14).

In confounding the reader’s expectation for a final resolution, Walters does not absolve the weirdness attached to the Smithsonian and other academic institutions, and the novel demonstrates that the violence continues. The Smithsonian’s “caretakers” do not seem to know anything about the objects in their possession, nor do they treat them with respect. For instance, Geoffrey had once “playfully put on the necklace [of human fingers]. He was the kind of man who did that. The necklace lay on his plaid shirt, the dingers pressed against his flesh” (38). Donald is equally flippant when he comes across a string of Native ears: “With his left hand, he fingered the ears; they were dry and leathery. With his right hand, he poured himself a cup of coffee” (83). In a hollow attempt at cultural sensitivity, the Smithsonian invites Native leaders such as Jonnie Navajo and Wilbur Snake to the museum to examine the objects, but these actions are empty, since Walters shows that little has changed since their visit over twenty years ago. Moreover, even after his haunting experiences, Smithsonian historian Donald Evans, who is in charge of this profane collection, does not change his views; in fact, he doubles down on his ignorance and refuses to acknowledge both the ghostly presences around him and his own ignorance about the very cultures he claims to study.

Perhaps the most troubling unsolved mystery is the fate of Red Lady’s lost twin girl. While the novel answers this question for the readers through its description of Anita’s search for her familial origins, the characters of the story, including Anita, never arrive at an answer. Walters presents the opportunity for familial reunion at the Albuquerque Sunport when Anita spots Jonnie Navajo. While she stops to admire his
outfit and demeanor, Anita never realizes that this man is her mother’s great uncle and the brother of Maria, the lost twin. Anita gets a second chance at learning her family history when she reads the announcement David Drake placed in a magazine searching for descendants of Navajo slaves, but again this possibility is frustrated when she dismisses the idea and throws the magazine away (196). Rather than satisfying the reader by providing the answer to the mystery of Maria, this revelation actually causes the reader even more frustration since the characters are tantalizingly close to learning the truth themselves. As Rhoda Carroll notes in her interview with Walters, “In Anglo tradition, there’s something that wants discoveries made and identities revealed and lost children returned” (69). Walters’s decision is practical: reality does not often work that way. She explains, “These problems don’t have easy solutions” (Carroll and Walters 69).

Such a hard fact about reality stymies the white men in the novel, such as David Drake, who at the beginning of the narrative was commissioned by Jonnie Navajo to find out what happened to his lost kin. However, David never truly grasps the importance of his given mission. While his intentions are initially benign, David eventually gives up on both the case of the missing girl and on his goal of writing a definitive Navajo history. Instead, encouraged by the advice of his white peers he resolves to “do what was right— for him” (200). Although he has not even received all of Jonnie Navajo’s testimony, David decides that “he could reject it in its entirety or in part, and he could even alter it, to suit his needs. He would take care to be objective, fair, and thorough. He couldn’t think of anyone who could do a better job” (200). In narrating David’s decision, Walters gives readers a firsthand look at how history is produced and, while flawed, nevertheless becomes the dominant narrative. Drake’s perspective is perhaps the weirdest of all in
Ghost Singer, for he fetters the reader’s assumptions about the legitimacy of history. In fact, the novel questions dominant history and the methodology of collecting Native American artifacts, and it seemingly leaves no answers to the mysteries of history. In the context of weird fiction, Walters uncovers an indigenous past and present that must contend with the literal and discursive violence of history, and fiction proves to be the most compelling realm in which to reimagine historical violence.

Almanac of the Dead takes up many of the same themes as Walters does in Ghost Singer, in particular, the history of Native slavery, but also delves into other topics ranging from body harvesting, drug trafficking, and the makings of a pan-Indigenous revolution. Almanac of the Dead is in many ways a response to the acclaim Silko’s first novel Ceremony received. As Alex Hunt explains, “While Ceremony remains a powerful geographical recentering of Laguna Pueblo within national and global contexts, it is nevertheless a novel which for many readers affirms a feel-good sympathy for Native Americans and a shallow environmental spiritualism” (257). Adam Sol sums up reviewer-response with the observation that “where Ceremony uplifts, Almanac overturns” (24). Alan Cheuse maintains that Almanac is “one of the great American naysaying creations,” and concludes that it is “flawed, massive, scarred and visionary, [but] it is book that must be dealt with” (1). Silko unsettled her critics with Almanac of the Dead, since the novel challenged their expectations of the Native American novel in the aftermath of the Native American Renaissance and the mainstream acclaim of Ceremony. Silko’s shell-shocked World War II veteran, Tayo, completes her first novel’s ceremony and gains an environmental awareness that links the Southwest to Asia, Asia to Alaska. In Almanac of the Dead, Silko weirds the Native American novel altogether by setting
the action of her narrative within the urban and underground spaces of the Southwestern borderlands in addition to the global communities that seem destined to reunite with them.

Many critics were perplexed and even outraged by *Almanac*. Alan Ryan of *USA Today*, for instance, infamously suggested that “the novel itself needs remedial help” (D6). For Paul West, “Here is an excellent work of myth and a second-rate novel,” and he argues that “Silko’s own sensibility is to blame” (1). Both reviewers direct their criticism at the author herself. As West explains, “Death and disrespect come moving through the brutal, narcotized world she likes to deal with, and I begin to wonder if the disjointed, non-cumulative nature of her enormous book represents the shattered mind of an atavist” (1).

Rebecca Tillett troubles these reviews and remembers “the long history of the diagnosis and popular perception—chiefly both spurious and politically motivated—of female ‘mental illness’ by a primarily white, male medical profession” (“‘The Indian Wars’” 25). Most critics fail to mention the novel’s tribute to the five-hundred-year-long war between Indigenous people and western culture, which is key to understanding the novel’s context and mission.

Just as she timed *Ceremony* to coincide with the anniversary of 1776, Silko also planned *Almanac*’s publication to coincide with the quincentennial of Christopher Columbus’s supposed discovery of the Americas (Tillett, “‘The Indian Wars’” 27). In many ways, *Almanac of the Dead* is a war novel in addition to a manifesto detailing the political revolution Silko sees on the horizon. It is also a novel of survival. Through her characters, Silko details the countless ways that Native life has been altered and at times destroyed. One example is Yoeme, an old Yaqui woman who passes down the almanacs
to her twin granddaughters, which were themselves saved from the Reign of Death-Eye Dog that was inaugurated by the meeting of Tenochtitlan ruler Montezuma and Spanish explorer Hernán Cortés. Yoeme also passes down her family history, which indicates that the bloodlust Europeans brought with them is still not satisfied. “They had been killing Indians right and left. It was the white men coming to find more silver, to steal more Indian land” (117). Christopher Breu notes, “The novel depicts slavery as existing in tension with the continuous war that is being waged between the Yaqui and the Mexican government, which is in turn one front within the five-hundred year war for the Americas” (162). Silko’s goal is to narrate the views from multiple fronts that, if joined together, are capable of ending this centuries-long war once and for all.

Just as Walters challenges the legitimacy of museums in her novel, Silko sets her eyes on maps. Maps have long been used to categorize indigenous peoples and quarter off indigenous land. As Silko explains in an interview with Laura Coltelli, “Western European maps are used to steal Indian lands, to exclude, to imprison, to cut off, to isolate even segments of the human world from one another” (120). Drawing attention to the European cartographical mistake of mislabeling Asia with her novel’s publication date unsettles the supposed legitimacy of the object in question. On the map Columbus used to navigate, the Americas and its inhabitants were invisible. Silko’s novel draws the Americas onto the European map using Native sensibilities. The novel opens with a map that marks Tucson, Arizona, at the center. As Hunt explains, the novel is a project in “unwriting the colonial map” (257). Silko disregards typical mapping conventions, such as scale and subject. For instance, according to Silko’s map, Cherryhill, New Jersey is in close proximity to Albuquerque. As Silko explains, “I drew that map in Almanac as a
‘glyphic’ representation of the narrative. This ‘glyph’ shows how the Americas are ‘one,’ not separated by artificial, imaginary ‘borders.’ The landscapes, the spirits of the places are known by the narratives that originate in these places” (Coltelli 119). Instead of mapping simple place-names, Silko maps each character’s physical and narrative trajectory from one place to another, indicating how individuals define a place and how place defines the individual. In doing so, “Silko exposes the reader mercilessly to the oppression of the subaltern, colonized America visible at the margins of the national map” (Hunt 257).

The map reads, “Native Americans acknowledge no borders; they seek nothing less than the return of all tribal lands” (1991 n.p.). By erasing borders, Silko disregards the cultural, political, and national boundaries they signify. As much as Silko wants to undo the violence that maps often perpetuate, she is also bent on “redefining identity beyond nationalism and even beyond ethnicity” (Hunt 264).

The re-envisioned map segues into an almanac. Breu notes, “Like an almanac, the novel is made up of heterogeneous materials, history, theory, individual and collective stories, theology, accounts of revolutionary praxis, and so on” (161). Silko’s choice of the almanac links her novel to the Mayan almanacs, which were said to have predicted the arrival of Europeans to the Americas and the fall of the Mayan empire. The Mayan almanacs were infamously destroyed by Spanish invaders, and much of their invaluable knowledge was lost. Although much of that information has been passed down through oral tradition, Silko imagines a more radical vision: that the almanacs survived and continue to be physically passed along in secret.
An almanac is functional but also prophetic, and essentially connected to the earth and its material conditions, which is fitting since, “After all, the novel’s subject is indigenous reappropriation of the land” (Hunt 259). Indeed, the almanac is more in line with Silko’s philosophy than maps since the almanac denotes an intimate connection with natural phenomena. Throughout the novel, the abstract nature of the map is contrasted with the reality of the land. Take for example, the elderly Yupik woman named Rose, who “uses her pelt, her stories, and a weather map on the television screen successfully to crash an airplane that is carrying surveyors and equipment from American oil companies” (Salyer 275). As the novel explains, “The old woman had gathered great surges of energy out of the atmosphere, by summoning spirit beings through the recitations of the stories that were also indictments of the greedy destroyers of the land” (Almanac 156). The insurance adjuster sent to investigate briefly considers that there might be a supernatural component involved in the crash, such as with the Bermuda Triangle disappearances, but he eventually concludes, “None of that stuff is true. It can all be explained” (160). The novel explains this “supernatural” event as a response to the history of violence that goes back five hundred years and crosses continents, whether in the sky or on the land. Rose’s method of resistance is similar to Silko’s: they both look to the natural world, Rose with her animal pelt and Silko with her invocation of the land itself. The two women combine their powers with indigenous oral histories, which themselves can never be separated from the land. In this way, Silko weirds Western technology, producing a new set of myths that challenge the “authenticity” and dismissal of Native knowledge.

One common critique of Almanac of the Dead is that it does not tie up all its loose ends, and while the reader learns the fate of some characters, many are left in limbo.
Indeed, Silko stops short of narrating the revolution that has been culminating throughout the novel. However, close attention to the form of her novel makes such a mysterious ending inevitable: almanacs never end because time keeps going and the land is constantly changing. Breu sees this “emphasis on the open possibility of the future” not as a textual fault, but rather as being indicative “that the novel is invested not just in representation but in enactment, in intervening in the present to produce a future event” (161). This observation is backed up by Silko’s *Ceremony*, which narrates how a group of witches, “the destroyers,” brought European conquest to life through words (191). These destroyers are also featured heavily in *Almanac of the Dead*. One witch of mysterious clan affiliation tells a story of whites who will come to across the ocean to their world and “‘explode everything’” (127). The other witches are horrified by this story. “‘Take it back./ Call that story back,’” they say. “But the witch just shook its head” and replies, “‘It’s already turned loose./ It’s already coming./ It can’t be called back’” (128). Thus in writing the events of *Almanac of the Dead*, Silko is bringing these revelation into fruition. In this way, “The Mayan and pan-Native almanacs, which Lecha, Zeta, and Seese are in the process of translating as the novel unfolds, are not only the novel’s subject but the novel itself” (Breu 161). In the writing of the novel’s events, the novel becomes one of the almanacs, in fact the almanac which holds the predictions for the radical future Silko envisions.

Silko’s focus is on the land and the ways that Anglo exploitation of the natural world mirrors their exploitation of Native peoples. One vivid example is narrated by Yoeme, who recalls
The fucker Guzman, your grandfather, sure loved trees. They were cottonwoods got as saplings from the banks of the Rio Yaqui. Slaves carried them hundreds of miles. The heat was terrible. All water went to the mules or the saplings. The slaves were only allowed to press their lips to the wet rags around the tree roots. After they were planted at the mines and even here by this house, there were slaves who did nothing but carry the water to those trees. “What beauties!” Guzman used to say. By then they had no more “slaves.” They simply had Indians who worked like slaves but got even less than slaves had in the old days. (116)

Breu observes that Guzman’s valuing of the cottonwood trees over the lives of the Yaqui “is a violent inversion of the pan-Native ethic of respect for and valuation of all living things . . . . Rather than all beings being afforded respect and valuation, all beings are rendered as objects to be accumulated and disposed of by those who count as subjects” (165). Later, Guzman hangs “rebel” Yaqui from the same cottonwoods they helped to transplant. In this way, Guzman exploits Native labor as well as Native bodies, this time as a symbol and warning to others who would defy him.

Silko not only shows that the exploitation of vulnerable individuals has been occurring for centuries, but also that the exploiters have harnessed technology to streamline the process and provide the excuse that this violence is in service of scientific advancement. Another character, Trigg, is also interested in transplantation, but his main focus is on human bodies. Trigg explains that he deals in biomaterials: “the industries ‘preferred’ term for fetal brain material, human kidneys, hearts and lungs, corneas for eye transplants and human skin for burn victims” (398). At first, Trigg is simply interested in
real estate, buying cheap tracts of land with the idea of “revitalizing” Tucson. In the meantime, he decides to construct a blood donation center that is fed almost exclusively by the homeless population of Tucson. He also harvests corpses to act as organ donors to the wealthier citizens of the area. Breu points out how, as his greed grows, he is “no longer satisfied to ‘harvest’ the dead and those ‘inessential’ body parts and bodily substances, such as blood and kidneys, with which the living can safely part” (170). Trigg begins to murder the donors, justifying his actions as for the greater good, an escalation in violence that demonstrates the legacy of American imperialism. Trigg buys the land at below market value cost, exploits the marginalized people who live there by literally draining away their life blood, uses their bodies and organs to sustain the upper class, and then ultimately disposes of the bodies to make room for a new wave of wealthy settlers intent on gentrifying the area.

Although Trigg’s morbid economy is truly horrifying, Walters shows that he is not the first to devise such a scheme. In Ghost Singer, historian Donald discovers a string of ears in the Smithsonian archives, along with various pieces of jewelry and pottery. In a letter accompanying the objects, he reads that the original owner “dug up the jewelry near the Oklahoma/ Louisiana line ourselves” (Ghost Singer 83), implying that the owner ransacked Native graves to steal these objects. The ears were acquired through a similarly grotesque manner: “Daddy ran across the ears in New Mexico and won them in a poker game about 1890. They’re Indian ears all right. They won’t be of much use to anyone, except to someone who might want to hang them on a trophy mantle—a conversation piece for sure” (84). While “Daddy” did not procure these ears directly, his ownership of them implicates him in the violence and ideology that produced them. The writer notes
that these pieces might be of some monetary value and instructs, “Try a museum first” (83). Like Yoeme’s story, this letter in Walters’ novel implicates a whole network of individuals in the trafficking of human body parts.

Donald also finds a Native man’s scalp in the national archives, which in turn recalls the novel’s opening trauma and Red Lady’s father, White Sheep, being scalped by the slave traders who steal his daughter and granddaughter. Geoffrey Newsome, the caretaker of the archives who later commits suicide after his work follows him home, justifies the museum’s “total control over the stored artifacts and remains—consisting of necklaces made of severed fingers, pairs of Navajo ears, scalps, skulls, and an entire mummified body—as a legitimate strategy to ensure scientific progress” (Tatschner 5). Trigg’s human trafficking and organ harvesting operation is thus not without historical precedent. Trigg’s extraction of major organs from within human bodies mirrors the extraction of valuable minerals from within the earth, but when put in the context of Walters’s Ghost Singer, Trigg’s operation also calls to mind the cultural imperialism of anthropology. In this way, both Walters and Silko challenge the contention that exploitation of Native bodies is a past phenomenon. Instead, they weird time and space through their implication of not only nineteenth-century slave traders, but also of past amateur and present professional anthropologists in addition to the blood donation and organ harvesting industries, which are supposedly benign and impartial, but which, Silko contends, target vulnerable groups so as to benefit upper-class populations, which often means whites. This comparison creates a weird moment for the reader, who must question these forms of exploitation and the justification of them through environmental racism and colonialism. Walters’ and Silko’s critiques unsettle concepts of scientific
impartiality and reveal the economic imbalances that are perpetuated by systemic racism that is still very much alive in the present.

Along with the Mayan codices, Silko’s title also alludes to the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead, a spiritual manual created to help the deceased pass through the various trials they must face after death. Silko’s double allusion is key since it linguistically demonstrates another connection she forcefully makes between the Americas and Africa. The two continents share a similar history of colonialism, which rebel Angelita, aka La Escapía, explains: “European colonials . . . had been sent [to Africa and the Americas] by their capitalist slave-masters to secure the raw materials of capitalism—human flesh and blood” (Almanac 315). Yet, they also contain a deeper connection, one noted by Clinton, the “first black Indian,” as he considers African American slave resistance in the Americas.

From the beginning, Africans had escaped and hid in the mountains where they met up with survivors of indigenous tribes hiding in remote strongholds. In the mountains the Africans had discovered a wonderful thing: certain of the African gods had located themselves in the Americas as well as Africa: the Giant Serpent, the Twin Brothers, the Maize Mother, to name a few. Right then the magic had happened: great American and great African tribal cultures had come together to create a powerful consciousness within all people. All were welcome—everyone had been included. (416)

In this sense, cross-cultural connections know no cultural or geographic boundaries. The magical experiences the escaped slaves previously experienced in their homeland could
also manifest in the mountains of the Americas. While readers may be quick to accuse Silko of glossing over cultural differences, her description serves to bring about cultural alliances: it is essential to acknowledge difference, she argues, but we should not let that difference fetter potential revolutionary allies.

Tribal groups from all over the world are also drawn together through the symbology of the snake. Clinton recognizes “the Great Serpent” of Africa (416) and the Barefoot Hopi speaks of the African snake Damballah\(^\text{10}\) while the exiled Laguna man Sterling raises the image of the thirty-foot sandstone snake that appeared on Laguna land at the site of a newly opened uranium mine (34). Although people argued over the meaning of this omen, the snake resisted interpretation. Silko narrates that the “snake didn’t care if people were believers or not; the work of the spirits and prophecies went on regardless” (762). Snakes are important figures for various indigenous communities. The Pawnee, for instance, revered the snake, so it is no coincidence that the two wisest characters in Ghost Singer are from the snake clan. In Almanac of the Dead, Yoeme has the ability to speak with snakes, and she observes: “Snakes crawled under the ground. They heard the voices of the dead: actual conversations, and lone voices calling out to loved ones still living. Snakes heard the confessions of murderers and arsonists after innocent people had been accused” (130-131). No wonder, she thinks, “Catholic priests always [killed] snakes” (131). Angelita/ La Escapía recalls a similar childhood experience in which the “nuns had taught the children that the Morning Star, Quetzalcoatl, was really Lucifer, the Devil God had thrown out of heaven. The nuns had

\(^{10}\) Interestingly, Damballah is the god to which the conjure man Saul Stark prays in Robert E. Howard’s “Black Canaan.”
terrified children with the story of the snake in the Garden of Eden to end devotion to Quetzalcoatl” (518–19). Silko’s almanacs explain that the ancient Aztec god Quetzalcoatl “gathered the bones of the dead and sprinkled them with his own blood, and humanity was reborn” (136). Sterling’s exile from Laguna Pueblo stems from the accusation that he conspired with a Hollywood film crew to steal the stone snake and sell it for drug money. This troubling accusation triggers the Laguna people’s “earlier sense of betrayal by the white US government officials who had stolen their idols and eventually displayed them in a museum as rare cultural artifacts” (Muthyala 378). Once again, Walters’ condemnation of the museum prefigures Silko’s critique.

The last lines of Silko’s novel focuses on the snake, which “was looking south, in the direction from which the twin brothers and the people would come” (Almanac 763). The snake mirrors the prophecy that is narrated in Zeta and Lecha’s almanac, told to them by “the sacred messenger spirit” snake that “‘This world is about to end’” (135). Zeta and Lecha take the appearance of the stone snake at Laguna to mean that Quetzalcoatl’s return is on the horizon and that the dead will be resurrected to join with the living in their question to take back the land. Their prophecy is backed by the Barefoot Hopi, who says:

In Africa and in the Americas too, the giant snakes, Damballah and Quetzalcoatl, have returned to the people . . . [and] they speak through dreams. The snakes say this: From out of the south the people are coming, like a great river flowing restless with the spirits of the dead who have been reborn again and again all over Africa and the Americas, reborn each generation more fierce and more numerous. Millions will move
Christianity and other Western religions believe in a strict line demarcating the dead from the living, but many indigenous cultures view these two transitional phases as inexorably connected and intertwined. Thus, one of the weirdest moments in both novels is when the authors challenge the idea that the dead are long gone. As Junior, Wilbur’s son, argues in *Ghost Singer*, “‘everything is in our minds. The possibilities and the impossibilities. . . . Our minds are the boundaries of our physical selves’” (Walters 177). Once people begin to open their minds to the possibility of ghosts, dreams, and prophecies, Walter and Silko would argue, then the real revolution can begin. *Ghost Singer* demonstrates that the dead are still here and they very much matter. Dorothy Graber notes, “Walters makes clear how crucial the links between the living and the dead are to the cultural survival of indigenous peoples, links that have been all but shattered by Western practices of studying and collecting the dead, while inexorably trying to destroy the living” (14). This sentiment is most clearly embodied in Wilbur and Anna Snake, an elderly Pawnee couple who maintain a deep connection to their cultural teachings concerning life and death.

Wilbur explains that what Western logic conceives of as reality has “‘got an edge to it that ain’t too clear’” (Walters, *Ghost Singer* 125). Anna shares similar views, recalling that “She herself had seen people after their deaths on several occasions” (125). Rather than a unique or disturbing experience, she realized that, “Many of the Oklahoma tribal people often found that to be a normal experience” (125). In fact, “according to her people’s way of thinking, something would have been wrong with her if she didn’t see
beyond this world. It would mean that her senses didn’t work, and that she, in a way, was handicapped by her own lack of sensitivity” (125). Russell notes that part of the reason white archivists are committing suicide is because they deny what they see: “‘She [Jean] tried to act like she didn’t see, but she did. Didn’t do her no good to deny it, didn’t help her any, as far as I can tell’” (19). There is nothing inherently evil about the Ghost Singer or the other spirit people who haunt the archives. Instead, it is the white characters’ inability to face the past that leads to their deaths.

The ghosts in Walters’ novel are not limited to Native ones. Indeed, Graber observes that “the actions of dead whites do not disappear in their power nor does the need for justice evaporate in the wake of their deeds” (10). These actions comprise the true haunting of Walters’ text and are what compel the dead to return. Likewise, the spirits in *Almanac of the Dead* have not been blind to the continuing atrocities committed against the land and their communities. As Clinton notes, “‘the Americas were full of furious, bitter spirits; five hundred years of slaughter has left the continents swarming with millions of spirits that never rested and would never stop until justice had been done”’ (Silko, *Almanac* 424). Like in *Ghost Singer*, the spirits of the dead rage against the injustices done to them and their communities. Both Walters and Silko use ghosts to uncover the atrocities of the past and their manifestations in the present. Some contemporary readers might see the Native lack of optimism in Walters’s book as ill-founded in light of the passage of the NAGPRA, yet Walters points to the disturbing fact that the U.S. needs such legislation in the first place. In weirding the museum, Walters also weirds Western logic that legitimizes the theft of Native land and the continuing relegation of Native peoples to the past. Likewise, Silko weirds the map in order to draw
attention to what she perceives as an ability to comprehend the transgression of boundaries. In doing so, Silko crafts her own prophecy, one that the reader takes part in by reading *Almanac of the Dead*. Both authors turn to fiction to rewrite the indigenous histories haunting Native and Anglo-European people alike, and they recast the weird West by engaging with the spaces that perpetuate the mythical Old West, the museum and the map, which the weird West typically overlooks in favor of gunfights and zombie resurrections. However, Walters and Silko, following Fisher, allow the reader “to see the inside from the perspective of the outside” (10) by demonstrating how the physical landscapes of the (weird) West are produced and commodified in the abstract, and often ignored, spaces of academia and science.
Conclusion

Weird Possibilities of “The In-between”

Ethnic and women writers weird dominant discourses about the West and Southwest. My conclusion reads across and between the texts in my study to provide a more comprehensive analysis of their similarities and differences, and to clear a space for the potential productivity that I argue still lies in the weird.

Many of the authors I examine write within established genres but utilize weird elements or alternative narrative structures that complicate the discourses that sustain those genres. Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Giant Wistaria” and Anna Lee Walters’s Ghost Singer employ a similar narrative structure that navigates between the past and the present. In each text, the authors preface the narratives with events that occur hundreds of years prior to the main storylines. Gilman employs this structure in order to reinforce the reader’s shock when her nineteenth-century characters uncover a body beneath the floorboards of the colonial mansion they are renting for the summer. The reader immediately makes the connection between the unnamed mother and child at the story’s beginning and the corpses recovered at the story’s end via the image of the red cross around the woman’s neck, which attests to the family’s hypocrisy, the woman’s innocence, and the gendered connections that exist across time. The story would still make sense without this preface, since the characters each experience a “ghostly” feeling or dream that prefigures the gruesome discovery, but with knowledge of the backstory, Gilman uncovers the domestic violence and sexual abuse that lies at the heart of the story.

In Ghost Singer, however, Walters never solves the mystery that she puts forth at the beginning of the novel with the story of Red Lady’s abduction and the loss of her
baby girl. The characters in the novel search for this familial connection by posting advertisements in magazines and researching family oral history, but their search is ultimately in vain. Maria’s daughter Anita never reunites with her family, and Jonnie Navajo dies without learning the fate of his missing kin. Because of the novel’s preface, the reader knows what the characters do not, and the novel consequently frustrates and forestalls a traditional ending that would unify broken families and heal old wounds. Walters does this in order to drive home the impact Southwestern slavery has had on indigenous families. As she explains, “These problems do not have easy solutions” (Carroll and Walters 69). As in Gilman’s text, this narrative tactic broadens the reader’s understanding of the lengthy legacy of Southwestern slavery, but it also weirds the reader’s relationship with the text. The unfulfilled ending disrupts the typical plot of a mystery or ghost story, which expects explanation and closure, and furthers the novel’s critique of Western logic, signified by its portrayal of white anthropologists and historians. David Drake fails to find archival records that would locate Jonnie Navajo’s kin, and he assumes that, without records, there is no answer at all. Yet the audience knows, and this partial knowledge of Red Lady’s story reinforces the validity of indigenous oral history as an alternative form of knowledge.

Walters’ story also contradicts the West’s unwavering belief in rationality through her use of ghosts in her narrative, which turn out to be real and not part of a superstitious belief in the afterworld. For Walters, ghosts certainly represent the restless past, but they are also physical manifestations that demonstrate the continuous kinship connections that survive after death. As Florian Tatschner explains, “The ghosts in the museum remain spectrally present to testify to the ongoing consequences of slave raids and termination
policies initiated by the militant epistemology of the Conquest” (14). Corpi’s *Black Widow’s Wardrobe*, the third installation in her Gloria Damasco mystery series, also employs the use of ghostly figures to reveal the weird reverberations of the ongoing effects of historical trauma. Like in “The Giant Wistaria” and *Ghost Singer*, a ghost comes back to right a wrong in Corpi’s text, and Corpi does little to dispel the idea that the ghost’s presence is real and not a hallucination borne out of superstition. Instead, as Inés Vassos notes, “Corpi toys with the reader” (70). At the novel’s conclusion, Licia Lecuona disappears. The other characters take her disappearance as confirmation of her death, but a year later Licia’s home is destroyed by fire, “even though the fire department determines arson was not a cause and no human remains are ever recovered. On this ambivalent note Corpi ends the novel” (Vassos 70). Witness accounts that Licia was seen walking into the house prior to the fire are confounded when no one sees her exit, leading to the assumption that it was her ghost returning from the dead to destroy the symbol of her earthly suffering. Yet Licia was always a ghostly figure, even prior to her mysterious disappearance, since she claimed to be the reincarnation of Malintzin, Hernán Cortés’s indigenous translator and mother of his two children. Corpi draws parallels between the domestic and the colonial, between the past and the present, to legitimate an often dismissed, female-focused Chicana folklore through this weird figure who refuses to be contained.

Another theme that spans many of these texts is the topic of slavery. Both of Robert E. Howard’s short stories evoke the history of borderlands slavery. The metaphor of the vampire at the center of Howard’s “The Horror from the Mound” speaks to the Spanish colonial exploitation of poor and indigenous peoples both in Spain and the
Americas. Meanwhile, his story “Black Canaan” plainly engages with white fears of a Black uprising, made manifest in 1845 and threatening the white community again with the leadership of Saul Stark. As I discuss in my second chapter, Reed writes back against the racist narratives Howard’s story upholds through the figure of the Loop Garoo Kid and his triumph over the white tyrants of Yellow Back Radio. Walters, Silko, and Scarborough all engage with the topic of slavery, as well, though to different ends. Although Scarborough’s novel is set after the Civil War, the South’s legacy of plantation slavery still looms large within the novel. Letty is nostalgic for the leisurely lifestyle she led while living at her Virginia home but fails to recognize the Black labor that supports such a living. The legacy of the South also haunts the landscape of the Southwest in the form of Robert E. Lee’s abandoned garrison where Lige attests one can still see the ghosts of soldiers past. As Susan Kollin observes, “In Scarborough's novel, the Indian as Gothic trope emerges at one point when Lige tells Letty of the aptly named ‘Fort Phantom Hill,’ the place where Robert E. Lee helped defend Texas against the Indians in pre-Civil War days” (683). With the inclusion of Cynthia Ann Parker’s story, “Scarborough’s novel, however, avoids merely replicating these reductive uses of Indians and provides instead a critique of the nation's expansionist ideologies” (683).

As the story of Parker goes, a band of Comanche scouts captured her in 1836 during a raid against her family’s frontier settlement, a history retold in Alan Le May’s 1953 novel *The Searchers* and told again in John Ford’s 1954 film adaptation. Twenty-four years after Parker’s captivity, she experienced another form of kidnapping by white soldiers after they ambushed the Comanche camp where she was living. During her time with the Comanches, Parker established a home and became part of the community, a
feeling she never regained when she returned to her white relatives’ community (Gwynne 181). Parker’s story thus highlights the ways borderlands slavery shaped gender, as Sheree Scarborough notes, for hers is “a legend that exemplifies the isolation and powerlessness of women in the West, and serves as a foreshadowing of Letty’s fate” (7).

Like Gilman, Scarborough critiques society’s treatment of women, but she does so through the (super)natural form of the relentless Texas winds that ultimately take control of the narrative. Silko and Walters, in turn, retell the history of slavery in the Southwest from an indigenous perspective. Walters’s novel makes evident how slavery did not begin with European colonization in the East, nor did it end with the Emancipation Proclamation, but that the Southwest has its own unique history of captivity and enslavement that continues into the twentieth century. Rebecca Tillett explains, “Consequently, the ghost story of the 1960s is itself constantly haunted by the events and politics of the past: of the genocide and inhumanity by which the Americas were settled, of the devastating impact of nineteenth-century Spanish and Mexican slave raids upon the Navajo, and of the assault upon tribal identity by imperial concepts of cultural assimilation” (“Resting” 85). D.S. Pensley expands on this thought, noting that “Since the Conquest, whites as colonizers have not only stolen Native lands and possessions but have also robbed Natives of their very persons: selling them into slavery; forcing assimilation and cultural genocide on them; scalping, beheading, and carrying off their freshly dead; and looting and disturbing their graves—the last easily accomplished given the many instances of removal, which left Native burial sites unprotected” (41).

Corpi and Anaya also touch on the legacy of slavery through the figurative and perhaps literal reincarnation of La Malinche, who was sold to Hernán Cortés as a slave
(Vassos 64). However, Corpi’s main focus is the exportation of indigenous artifacts. As Marissa Lopez argues, “In the novel, connections are metaphysical, such as Lecuona’s belief that she is the reincarnation of La Malinche, but they are also empirical, as evidenced in the very concrete story of pre-Columbian artifacts that structures the novel” (146). Here, Corpi explores the material side of slavery, like Walters, who critiques the culture of anthropology and the collecting of Native artifacts, both human and inanimate. In Corpi’s novel, the character of Juan Gabriel Legorreta, an anthropology professor at UC Berkeley, smuggles both Mesoamerican artifacts and illegal narcotics across the U.S.-Mexico border. Legorreta is also Licia’s brother-in-law who abuses her sister, Isabela. Lopez observes that Legorreta seeks “to monetize the material connection to the past he sees embodied in these objects” and also to “hold artifacts hostage” (154). As Leigh Johnson argues, “By linking domestic violence to the smuggling of pre-Columbian artifacts, Corpi connects domestic violence and war. The market for the pre-Columbian artifacts in the United States is an extension of empire that has roots in the Conquest” (167). Legorreta justifies his crimes by stating that Mexican-Americans do not value their history. As he tells Gloria, “‘You Mexicans—Chicanos—you are so ignorant. You don’t value what you have’” (80). Gloria’s detective partner Dora Saldaña explains: “‘We Chicanos are like the abandoned children of divorced cultures. We are forever longing to be loved by an absent neglectful parent— Mexico—and also to be truly accepted by the other parent—the United States’” (148).

Although Legorreta is apprehended by the law and the artifacts returned, Corpi’s reader knows that the issue is not resolved simply through the conviction of one smuggler. Indeed, Walters also discusses the issue of the illegal and immoral acquisition
of not only indigenous artifacts but indigenous bodies by Western institutions. Her character Anna Snake explains, "I’m afraid that our people are still being bought and sold, even though they are dead—and have been dead for hundreds of years! . . . . When does it stop?" (207). Tatschner explains that the ghosts that haunt the white anthropologists and eventually drive them to their deaths stem “from a collection of Native human remains and artifacts stored in the attic of the Smithsonian Institute in Washington D.C.,” which “are shown to harbor a live spectral repertoire in which the past actively remains present or presences” (3-4). Silko also addresses this concern and extends it to connect to twentieth-century biopolitics, specifically the harvesting of human body parts through her character of Trigg, who preys on Tucson’s homeless for profit. Christopher Breu explains that, “No longer satisfied to ‘harvest’ the dead and those ‘inessential’ body parts and bodily substances, such as blood and kidneys, with which the living can safely part, Trigg starts to kill his largely homeless clientele in order to meet the international demand for his product” (170). Silko connects Trigg’s brutal acts with the original “destroyers” in her description of “The Reign of Death-Eye Dog,” which spans “the past five centuries into the present and [is] marked by a destroyer consciousness that ‘worships blood,’ objectifying and commodifying living beings and life-worlds even as it rehearses its own destruction” (Graber 13).

Silko’s novel was published after the passing of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act in 1990, but she demonstrates that this legislation fails to account for the modern-day iterations of slavery. Many critics and readers found Almanac’s plot points to be outlandish, but she weirds western conventions such as the
global organ and tissue transplantation donation industry to demonstrate how these forms of exploitation morph and adapt across time.

Anaya’s first installment of his Sonny Baca series *Zia Summer* also connects the exploitation of human bodies and the land, this time through the body of Gloria, Sonny’s cousin and first sexual partner. The novel opens with the image of Gloria’s lifeless body drained of blood. Her murder is eventually traced back to an occult group’s ritual sacrifice, but through the zia symbol carved on her stomach, the murder and mutilation also signals the environmental exploitation of Albuquerque and New Mexico, in general, by developers such as Frank Dominic, Gloria’s husband, “a candidate for mayor with a plan to develop Albuquerque as the Venice of the Southwest, with an extensive canal system and various expensive tourist attractions” (Davis-Undiano 135). Although Dominic is foiled in *Zia Summer*, he again attempts to gain political and economic of Albuquerque in *Jemez Spring*. This time in league with Sonny’s nemesis Raven, Dominic’s “water plans include not only privatizing water rights but also rewriting history by planting an ancient Caucasian skull in the Santa Fe Mesa to erase Pueblo claims to being First Peoples in the region” (Sánchez 237-238). Anaya’s plot extends Walters’ exploration of the dangerous power that archaeologists hold over Native peoples’ lives. As Tillett explains, “From the viewpoint of many contemporary Native peoples in the United States, the agenda of anthropology is inextricable from the imperial agenda of the nation state. This correlation is evident in the centrality of anthropological theory to some of the most despised and devastating Federal Indian policies” (“Resting” 97).
Silko and Walters implicate supposedly neutral western institutions for their role in the perpetuation of colonialism and the exploitation of indigenous peoples by weirding perceptions surrounding museums and other academic spaces.

The extraction of indigenous relics is also tied to the exploitation natural resources in Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead*. As La Escapía points out, “‘European colonials . . . had been sent [to Africa and the Americas] by their capitalist slave-masters to secure the raw materials of capitalism—human flesh and blood’” (315). Silko establishes that this destroyer mentality is an innate and integral aspect of colonialism, but one which ironically led to the avenues of rebellion Silko’s novel explores. Clinton further explains this connection between Africa and the Americas: “From the beginning, Africans had escaped and hid in the mountains where they met up with survivors of indigenous tribes hiding in remote strongholds. In the mountains the Africans had discovered a wonderful thing: certain of the African gods had located themselves in the Americas as well as Africa: the Giant Serpent, the Twin Brothers, the Maize Mother, to name a few” (416). This connection is a powerful one, since “All were welcome-everyone had been included” (416).

Ishmael Reed also points to the multi-ethnic geography of the Southwest through Loop’s animal familiar, which takes the form of a white python, following his loa, or hoodoo god, Damballah, to fight white supremacy. He also works alongside of Chief Showcase, who tells Loop, “‘Indians and black people have been roaming the plains of America together for hundreds of years . . . . Dick Gregory represented our Washington tribes in their treaty fights’” and “‘the Seminole fought invasion after invasion against the Fiend to protect black fugitive slaves’” (42). It is interesting to note that the deity to
whom the conjure man Saul Stark prays in “Black Canaan” is also Damballah. At first, Silko’s description of Damballah appears to be an indication of a profound misreading on Howard’s part. However, this cross-racial connection is exactly something which his protagonist Kirby Buckner fears. Indeed, the figure of the snake appears often in *Almanac*, leading Jane Olmsted to observe that the snake “may be the central spiritual fetish of the book” (468). The snake notably appears at the end of *Almanac of the Dead* with the image of the great stone snake that appears out of the sacred Mount Taylor overnight, which “was looking south, in the direction from which the twin brothers and the people would come” (763). The snake carries Silko’s prediction that indigenous peoples will take back the land through cross-cultural and racial alliances that are upheld through shared histories of oppression. In Christianity and Western culture, the snake is viewed as evil, but as Silko reveals, the denigration of snakes is no accident but an attempt to repress indigenous beliefs and the potential opportunities for resistance.

The connections across texts in my study make it clear that the weird West is still a productive literary space for understanding how ethnic and women writers unearth forgotten histories of the West and Southwest. There are a number of indigenous and women writers now working in speculative fiction, but the weird is rarely acknowledged as a literary category or as a methodology that might explain a new way of thinking about fictional borders. As Mark Fisher explains, much of weird fiction contains references to “thresholds between worlds: often the egress will be a book” or sometimes “literally a portal” (28). This metaphor of a portal is apt for the texts I have examined since they function as a gateway for readers to experience a world with which they are unfamiliar. Moreover, as Fisher continues, “the notion of the between is crucial to the weird” (28).
Scholars of ethnic and Southwestern literature have long pointed to the borderlands as a site of in-betweenness, best figured in Anaya, Corpi, and mestiza/o texts. The idea that the weird involves “an irruption, through time and space, into an objectively familiar locale” (Fisher 20) reverses tropes of European conquest and further adds to border-crossing dialogues in which many of these texts engage. The weird allows these writers to turn their gaze on western literary and cultural conventions, unsettling reader expectations and challenging hegemonic representations of ethnic cultures.
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