With 'cheekbones and noses like eagles and hawks': Indigeneity and Mestizaje in Ana Castillo's 'The Mixquiahuala Letters' and Leslie Marmon Silko's 'Almanac of the Dead'

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With “cheekbones and noses like eagles and hawks”: Indigeneity and Mestizaje in Ana Castillo’s *The Mixquiahuala Letters* and Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead*

As a mestiza born to the lower-strata, I am treated at best, as a second class citizen, at worst, as a non-entity. I am commonly perceived as a foreigner everywhere I go, including in the United States and in Mexico. [...] And by U.S. standards and according to some North American Native Americans, I cannot make official claims to being indio [Indian]. Socioeconomic status, genetic makeup and ongoing debates on mestizaje aside, if in search of refuge from the United States I took up residence on any other continent, the core of my being would long for a return to the lands of my ancestors. My ethereal spirit and my collective memory with other indigenas [indigenous women] and mestizo/as yearn to claim these territories as homeland. —Ana Castillo, *Massacre of the Dreamers*, 21

I suppose at the core of my writing is the attempt to identify what it is to be a half-breed, or mixed-blood person; what it is to grow up neither white nor fully traditional Indian. It is for this reason that I hesitate to say that I am representative of Indian poets or Indian people. I am only one human being, one Laguna woman. —Leslie Marmon Silko, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*, 197

Ana Castillo (Chicana) and Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo) share a personal and literary focus on mixedblood or mestiza/o experiences and reference indigenous oral traditions as a means of negotiating identity and the vagaries of modern life. Both writers interogate and undermine the borders that delineate colonially imposed nation-states in the Americas. At the same time, in their efforts to re-vision and articulate a sense of cultural identity, they craft conceptions of indigeneity and mestizaje that are at odds in ways that reflect historically rooted tensions between their communities—tensions shaped by differential experiences of colonization and its legacies. Although each upends aspects of colonialist discourse, conceptions of indigeneity and mestizaje conveyed in *The Mixquiahuala Letters* and *Almanac of the Dead* are influenced by the very colonialist assumptions the novels otherwise aim to dismantle. In this article I explicate and compare how indigeneity and mestizaje are defined in these novels, while
addressing relationships between the novels’ conceptions of indigeneity and mestizaje, popular colonialist discourse, and anti-colonial articulations of identity that have developed in American Indian and Chicana/o communities. By reading *Letters* and *Almanac* against one another thusly, I aim to make a case for more frequent and nuanced comparative analyses of American Indian and Chicana/o literatures. Such comparative analyses have the potential to deepen our assessments of the sociopolitical implications of each literary tradition, better appreciate the deep and critical interrelations between them, and—perhaps more importantly—evaluate how these literary works participate in, perpetuate, and dismantle a colonial inheritance that frequently divides two communities with overlapping cultures and histories.

*Letters* and *Almanac* offer particular opportunities for evaluating identity formation vis-à-vis indigeneity in Chicana/o versus American Indian communities. This is not to say that any work of American Indian or Chicana/o literature should be read as a transparent reflection of lived experience; rather, *Almanac* and *Letters*, due to their particular engagements with prominent social discourses of mestizaje and indigeneity, offer unique opportunities for comparatively evaluating aspects of American Indian versus Chicana/o experiences of identity formation. *Letters*’ protagonist, Teresa, travels routinely from the United States to Mexico with the aim of reconnecting with her indigenous roots and escaping the patriarchal gender norms of her family and marriage. Her initial expectations about Mexican cultures and social structures reveal the degree to which her sense of identity is predicated on entrenched narratives that fail to reflect Mexico’s complexity—and predispose Teresa’s quest for cultural cohesion to failure. Significantly (and, ultimately, tragically), Teresa envisions her recovery of home primarily as a return to a distant indigeneous past—which, I will demonstrate, places *Letters* in conversation with Mexican *indigenismo*, the myth of the Vanishing Indian, and the myth of Mexico as an
Infernal Paradise. Almanac’s Menardo, by contrast, grows up with a strong sense of Mexican indigenous ideologies, only to discover that identification as Indian will disqualify him for entrance into Mexican high society. Menardo consequently cuts ties to his family and attempts to pass as a member of the elite while working to amass the wealth necessary to secure his social position. In the context of a novel that centers on the vitality and persistence of indigenous peoples and worldviews throughout the Americas, with a massive cast of characters working toward an anticolonial revolution, Menardo stands out due to his rejection of a cultural inheritance that had remained relatively intact despite centuries of colonization. Moreover, through Menardo, Almanac critiques Mexican mestizaje as a cultural construct. I will consider whether this critique functions as the sort of exclusionary gesture Castillo ascribes to some North American Indians when it comes to Chicana/o claims to indigeneity (as she notes in the epigraph above).

At the same time, reading Letters against Almanac allows me to consider how Teresa’s inherited presuppositions about indigeneity perpetuate discourses that have functioned to bar indigenous peoples from the full rights of citizenship and self-determination. Teresa and Menardo are both mestizos, but inhabit opposite sides of the U.S.-Mexico border—the major colonial construct that has prompted waves of Chicana/o diaspora, bisected Mexicana/o families and indigenous tribes, and prompted certain distinctive articulations of cultural identity. Teresa’s and Menardo’s experiences nonetheless reflect key overlaps and differences in identity formation relative to the particular histories and ideologies of their home countries. That Menardo aims to eschew what Teresa strives to recover can be understood best, I argue, when contextualized relative to these different national circumstances, the consequences of Chicana/o diaspora, and traditional versus colonially influenced American Indian standards for tribal
Locating and recovering Mexican indigeneity in the context of the Chicana/o diaspora is critical to Teresa’s effort to formulate a cohesive identity—an effort she documents retrospectively and over approximately ten years in the letters she writes to her friend and frequent travel companion, Alicia. Convinced that relationships between men and women are inherently unequal and “entangled […] with untruths,” she travels to Mexico to escape her marriage and the disapproval of her patriarchal family (133). As if to confirm her conviction that patriarchal norms are culpable for her feelings of suffocation, her decision to leave for Mexico prompts her husband to deem her ungrateful and her mother to call her a bad wife and a bad person—designations that, for her mother, are one in the same. In contrast to the U.S., Mexico appears to Teresa initially as a place where she can both rid herself of these gender constraints and reclaim aspects of her cultural heritage (a fully realized mestizaje).

In short, Teresa strives to live out Sonia Saldívar-Hull’s conception of “feminism on the border,” which accounts for and is responsive to every aspect of Chicana experience (vis-à-vis race, class, gender, and sexuality). Teresa thus fits the mold of Castillo’s quintessential characters, as Roland Walter describes them: “border subjects positioned between cultures and in search of an alternative to their lived ‘nepantla’ state of invisibility and transition” (82). Her partial identifications and conflicts with the various cultures and norms she inherits are reflected in the fragmentary and syncretic style of the letters themselves, which are at turns detailed, speculative, dreamlike, and inconclusive. I would argue, however, that by traveling frequently and deeply into Mexico, Teresa hopes to escape borderlands nepantlism and access what she imagines to be more cohesive sense of self. The ongoing nature of this process is underscored by the letters’ non-chronological sequencing. Further, Castillo’s suggestion of different ways of
ordering the letters based on readers’ dispositions (cynical, quixotic, and romantic) in the front matter of the book signal that the ensuing narrative can be interpreted multiply and that Teresa’s authority over her own experiences and their meanings is not absolute. As Walter observes, “This device, the use of multiple perspectives and a protean, lyrical prose revealing both the conscious and unconscious levels of Teresa’s mental life, break with the chronological order of narrative and connote free choice and otherness” (83).

Central to Teresa’s conception of Mexico as home is her sense of its connection to her own (latent) indigeneity and matrilineal ancestry. Indeed, Teresa’s gender and cultural identities are deeply intertwined and the relationship between them interrogated throughout the novel. As Teresa reflects, “There was a definite call to find a place to satisfy my yearning spirit, the Indian in me that had begun to cure the ails of humble folk distrustful of modern medicine; a need for the sapling woman for the fertile earth that nurtured her growth […] I searched for home […] I chose Mexico” (52). She presumes that the yearning she feels—which she aligns with her stifled but emerging indigeneity—will be satisfied in a place that reflects her indigenous self. Home is something Teresa must not only seek actively but also choose—which is suggestive of the dislocation that attends Chicana/o diaspora. It appears that the U.S., her birth country, was a poor soil for cultivating these essential aspects of Teresa’s identity as an indigenous woman, and thus never functioned as a home in any substantive sense. For Teresa, coming of age involves the intersection of land (“fertile earth”), indigeneity, and womanhood—as communicated through her plant metaphor of the self. Her nascent Indianness propels a quest for home, soil that nurtures her growth from the “sapling woman” she sees herself as being. Teresa also conceives of this quest as a return to: the land of her maternal ancestors, a period before full womanhood (prior to marriage), and a pre- or at least anti-modern space (as indicated by the link between her Indian
self and “humble folk distrustful of modern medicine”).

Notably, Teresa’s location of indigenous Mexico in the distant past manifests just after her statement above about having chosen Mexico. She writes, “Books and curiosity gave me substantial reason to seek the past by visiting the wealth of ancient ruins that recorded awesome, yet baffling civilization. I planned a route: afterward, I would settle in Mexico City” (52). Teresa’s individual coming of age journey is constructed as a recapitulation of Mexican history, from antiquity to its contemporary metropolitan center: Mexico City—a city superimposed over the ruins of Tenochtitlán, home of the Mexicas (Aztecs) following their migration from Aztlán (the contemporary U.S. Southwest). Thus, Teresa’s temporal movement (beginning by seeking the past) to a critical palimpsestic site (in which Mexico’s colonial legacy and cultural heritage is layered like repurposed parchment) enacts a Chicana/o narrative that bisects the border and geographically links both the home she seeks (in Mexico) and that to which she reluctantly returns (in the U.S.). Teresa recalls visiting Mexico City “time and again since childhood, over and again as a woman. I sometimes saw the ancient Tenochtitlán, home of my mother, grandmothers, and greatmother, as an embracing bosom, to welcome me back” (98). It is pre-Columbian Tenochtitlán, not contemporary Mexico City, that she identifies as her maternal ancestors’s home (each of whom she names lived long after conquest) and which she characterizes as the “embracing bosom” that welcomes her return. Teresa thereby links her indigenous and female lineage and grounds them in the ancient center of Mexica culture—again underscoring that her quest is driven by a desire to escape interlocking cultural and gender-based oppressions.

By using Mexican history as a guide for charting her itinerary, Teresa defines her journey not as tourism—as Janet Cooper has suggested—but as a migration akin to those engaged in
historically by indigenous peoples throughout the Americas for economic or cultural survival. Teresa retraces the figurative footsteps of her Mexica forebears from Aztlán to Tenochtitlán/Mexico City not only to come closer to them and her own indigeneity, but in hopes of securing an autonomy denied her by gender norms operant in Chicano/a communities and dominant U.S. culture. 

This affinity with Mexico’s ancient past, however, calls into question how (or if) Teresa will find a home in contemporary Mexico. Instead of focusing on the indigenous people of modern-day Mexico City and their daily circumstances, she gazes through the city into its pre-Columbian past. When Teresa shifts her attention to the contemporary Mexico City in which she stands, her feelings of acceptance evaporate—lasting only long enough for her to observe that her mother’s homeland has treated her better than it did her mother. This moment suggests that her family’s diaspora has been undone, that she has reversed the exile begun when her mother and grandmother fled to the U.S. during the Revolution, as many Mexicans did (50, 99). 

But, this vision of a decolonial unraveling is fleeting, leaving Teresa to reflect that

Another myth involving Mexican tradition dissipated before our eyes. Mexican hospitality did indeed have its limits that could border on hostility and total lack of social graces practiced on those who seemed to be questionable worthwhile guests. We tried our best to make ourselves invisible in that home, eating sparingly, sitting in corners. We had practiced the role of the unwanted foreigners and continued it with disappointment when we realized we weren’t among friends. (99)

The language Teresa uses to describe contemporary Mexico constrasts sharply with that of her invocation of its ancient past. Instead of finding an “embracing bosom,” she and Alicia face borderline hostility that prompts them to shrink into the corners of “that home.” The fact that this
home is not theirs is underscored by the perception that they are regarded as foreigners. Teresa suggests that “unwanted foreigners” was “a role” they played, not their instinctive way of relating to their Mexican hosts, nor of seeing themselves in Mexico. Being forced to sustain this role means being rejected by those from whom Teresa anticipated the welcome of family, leaving her quest for home frustrated and her assumptions regarding the locus of her identity upended. As the opening line of the quotation indicates, this is not the only time that Teresa’s idyllic visions of Mexico are dismantled; the narrative of travel stiched together through Teresa’s letters is one of a series of disillusionments about Mexican tradition. Instead, the letters themselves, as Roland Walter and Tanya Bennett argue, become alternative sites for articulating and negotiating an identity that neither Mexico nor the U.S. fully reflects or validates.9

It is her location of indigenous Mexicanidad in a nostalgic past, I contend, that impedes Teresa’s desired recovery and impairs her ability to represent indigenous peoples in a more nuanced manner. The realities of daily life in contemporary Mexico cannot compete with the idealized pre-Columbian antiquity Teresa envisions. Consequently, I disagree with Walter’s identification of Teresa as one of several female characters in Castillo’s oeuvre whom, “by restoring their indigenous roots,” she invests “with a historicized and politicized consciousness […] as [a] strategy of empowerment and liberation” (92). Although, as many critics have illustrated,10 Castillo does link recovery of indigenous identity to Chicana identity and activism consistently in both her fiction and her political thought, in Teresa’s case such a recovery is not realized. The implications of Teresa's failure to develop a meaningful and sustained understanding of her indigenous identity become even more stark when considered in relation to Xicanisma—Castillo’s term for an activist Chicana feminism that is animated through reclamation of indigeneity and reinsertion of the "foresaken feminine" into Xicanistas’
consciousness (Massacre 12). Here, as in Letters, gender and culture are deeply interconnected pieces of identity and both must be negotiated in tandem in order to achieve positive self-definition and social change.

Several critics have noted Teresa’s idealization of Mexico’s indigenous history, but her past location of indigeneity and its varied implications have not been a focus of their analyses. I will address this critical lacuna by demonstrating that Teresa’s temporal bifurcation of ancient, indigenous versus modern day Mexico not only frustrates her desired homecoming but also perpetuates colonialisus constructions of indigeneity that have been used to deny indigenous peoples agency and justify appropriation of their resources. Bearing this context in mind allows us to appreciate that Teresa’s coming of age experience is shaped by broad, historically rooted, cultural discourses and, consequently, opens up new ways of reading Letters—not only as an account of personal identify formation vis-à-vis gender and culture, but as a novel with tangible consequences for the living communities Teresa fails to see in their contemporary contexts.

Both in Mexico and in the U.S. (as in colonial contexts generally), constructions of indigenous peoples as pre-modern or outside of time have served to rationalize colonization, even by those who claim to be motivated by Indian interests. Locating Mexican Indians in what Anne McClintock terms “anachronistic space” is pervasive in both Mexican indigenista and dominant U.S. literature and discourse—which have marginalized Indians from the sociopolitical life of the nations in which they live (30). Analisa Taylor notes that, with the 1948 inauguration of the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (The National Indigenist Institute), Mexico moved away from the revolution’s founding principles, namely “bilingual education, ambitious land redistribution, and cooperative land ownership according to indigenous laws and norms” and advocated the assimilation of indigenous peoples into Mexico’s mestizo mainstream (3). As
Taylor explains, *indigenismo* connotes “the idea that indigenous people should be included in the mainstream of modern national life” and “refers to a literary and visual mode that projects a romantic, folkloric image of the Indian as stoic, abject, and mysterious” (3). Indigenous people are represented in indigenista literature and art as located in a static, pre-modern world, in contrast to the mestizo who actively participates in modern society (3). Thus, as Taylor argues, *indigenismo* racializes the traditional versus modern dichotomy and “frames the conditions under which people are included or excluded from the nation” (3).

This racialized, temporal dichotomy has a gendered component as well: “While the mestizo is constructed as male and as the symbol of national unity, modernization, and progress, the Indian is depicted as feminine, fertile, and inert, linked to the productive agricultural landscape” (3) Teresa’s construction of indigenous Mexico as pre-modern and aligned with fertility, femininity, and the earth is thus consistent with *indigenista* discourse. At first blush, and in light of Teresa’s aims, these might seem like positive—though reductive and naïve—descriptors of Mexican indigeneity. However, when considered relative to the history of Mexican politics and policy, Teresa’s descriptors become more problematic. *Indigenismo*’s representation of Mexican Indians as stagnant and pre-modern has justified not only assimilationist measures but also the extension of the Mexican government more deeply into the affairs of Mexican Indians (see Tresierra). Although Teresa has no apparent political motivation for ascribing Indians to the past, she has a personal desire to access her indigenous heritage in a manner uncomplicated by a modern day, colonially wrought, nepantlism.

Further, Teresa’s romanticization of allegedly pre-modern Mexican Indians duplicates Mexican nationalist discourse of the first half of the 20th century, which celebrated Mexican mestizo identity, in part, by valorizing Mexico’s pre-Columbian indigenous past.11 However, as
Pérez-Torres suggests, “Advocating mestizaje served to effectively erase the presence of a contemporary indigenous identity in Mexico, relegating the Indian to the mists of a tragic and oblivious past” (*Mestizaje* 6). Thus, nationalist discourses of mestizaje ostensibly embraced Mexico’s ethnic diversity and aimed for the sort of cultural synthesis Teresa herself seeks but, in reality, continued to define indigeneity in a way that foreclosed Indians’ participation in contemporary Mexican life. As we will see, it is this very construction of mestizaje that Silko censures in *Almanac*.

Teresa’s letters arguably fall into a tradition of Chicana/o cultural production, beginning during the Chicano movement, which has reproduced such Mexican nationalist discourse. As Rosaura Sánchez argues, nationalist movements tend to appropriate indigenous myths in a decontextualized and dehistoricized fashion; in the process “Chicano/Chicana literary and cultural producers in effect reduce them to exotic discourses of *indigenismo* for the construction of a contemporary and radically different ethnic identity, imitating in the process cultural strategies for the production of national identity deployed by the Mexican government after the 1910 Revolution” (357-358). Thus, even as many of these writers and artists have worked to affirmatively articulate an identity that embraces their indigenous heritage, they have been influenced by discursive histories that exoticized, dehistoricized, and depoliticized indigenous peoples. Although Sánchez counts Castillo among those who disseminate a “refashioned *indigenismo*” as a means of combating the masculinist, Eurocentric culture that marginalizes her, we can also read Teresa’s character (who inherits multiple discourses that impede her identity formation) as Castillo’s own critique of the very practices Sánchez accuses her of perpetuating (358).
As a Chicana born and based in the U.S., Teresa’s perception of Indians as pre-modern likely is shaped as well by the ubiquity of such representations throughout U.S. history. The construct of the pre-modern Indian has played a pivotal role in the direction of U.S.-Indian policy and has had comparably deleterious effects on American Indians as *indigenismo* has had on Mexican Indians. One especially persistent example of this phenomenon is the myth of the Vanishing Indian, which posits that American Indians are destined to vanish (through assimilation or extermination) in the face of contact with an allegedly superior, Euroamerican, culture. This myth is bolstered by conceptions of Indians as backward and uncivilized, and therefore unable to persist as Indians into the future, and was used historically to justify Euroamerican appropriation of Indian lands (Deloria 63). According to Jana Sequoyah Magdaleno, the popular discourse of Indian authenticity denies American Indians

the conditions of modern identity-formation celebrated as freedom by the general citizenry of the United States. The problem, of course, is that the material conditions of being Indian have changed over time, while the images of Indianness have not. Thus, a more accurate rendering of Indian identity would articulate its retention in the teeth of modern history. (282)

Indeed, as many scholars have observed, such historically fixed, unchanging conceptions of Indian identity guarantees the realization of the Vanishing myth; if the only Indians recognized as such are those untouched by time or other cultures, it will be difficult to find Indians alive today. It is due, perhaps, to Teresa’s captivity to this framework that she can only see Indians, qua Indians, when imagining Mexico’s ancient past. For the same reason, contemporary manifestations of indigeneity (in herself or contemporary Mexico) that reflect necessary
adaptations made by any people over the span of centuries do not seem to register for her with the same force.

The notion that Indians exist outside of modernity has been perpetuated by Euroamericans sympathetic to American Indians as well. Some Euroamericans seeking to escape the ills of the modern world have been attracted to Indian cultures they perceived as an unchanging and authentic “first principle” in human evolution (Deloria 167). For Teresa, accessing pre-Columbian Mexico may suggest a means of escaping the cultural fragmentation that attends her borderlands condition and her family’s diaspora. Given her frustration with competing cultural codes and restrictive gender norms in Mexico and the U.S., her nostalgic and anachronistic view of Mexican Indians likely signals her positive associations with her indigenous heritage. Nonetheless, perpetuation of a discourse that has functioned as a repressive, colonialist tool should not be taken lightly. Indeed, the assumption that Indian social systems are backward and unsustainable in a modern context has justified in both the U.S. and Mexico forcible assimilation efforts, appropriation of indigenous lands, and the imposition of paternalistic federal policies on tribes with their own governing structures.¹⁴ That Teresa naively perpetuates this discourse speaks to its ubiquitous nature and the insidious ways in which it continues to be disseminated.

Teresa also uses the racialized “traditional” versus “modern” dichotomy characteristic of indigenista and dominant U.S. discourses to describe rural/indigenous versus urban/mestizo areas in Mexico (a racialized geographic dichotomy perpetuated through indigenismo but unreflective of the actual distribution of indigenous people in contemporary Mexico).¹⁵ Again, it seems that the lens through which she views Mexico distorts what she sees. In Letter Three, for example, Teresa describes the Mixquiahuala as “a Pre-Conquest village of obscurity, neglectful
of progress” that took her and Alicia “back at least to the time of colonial repression of peons and women who hid behind shutters to catch a glimpse of the street with its brusque men” (25, emphasis mine). Teresa’s descriptions of Mixquiahuala and its inhabitants remain detached and romanticized, due to the temporal remove at which she places the town. She sketches Mixquiahualans from the perspective of an observer, not a participant.

Teresa’s representation of Mixquiahuala diverges sharply from her description of Mexico City:

we discovered its ceaseless activity, the constant, congested traffic of aggressive drivers, monuments lit up brightly as if to bring in ships out of the fog, and peñas, student-oriented coffee houses with child-sized tables and chairs, patrons with knees at their chins listened as romantic, handsome youth belted out protest songs with lungs that carried the treble of volcanoes, lyrics of lava, penetrating as obsidian daggers” (26).

In contrast with the image of native Mixquiahualan women washing and beating “clothes against polished stone” (26), Mexico City is defined by bustle, commerce, technology, and political protest. Teresa, through direct juxtaposition, draws sharp distinctions between Mexico City’s dynamism and Mixquiahuala’s small town stasis. As Heiner Bus argues, two aspects of Mexico emerge in the letters:

The first one comprises exotic, idyllic small towns scenes e.g. in Mixquiahuala pervaded by a sense of timelessness but also of the perpetual immediacy and extreme closeness of life and death, destruction and recreation. […] The second aspect of Teresa’s Mexico is related to the experience of the two women never acknowledged as insiders. (130-131)

I would add that the timelessness of the first is derived from Indians functioning as shorthand for the pre-Columbian past—which precludes Teresa’s ability to connect with it in a personal and
direct sense. As to the second Mexico, Teresa may feel its rejection of her more acutely because she perceives it more as her own: modern and culturally complex.

Although these two visions of Mexico are distinctive on the whole, certain links between them occasionally emerge—links for which Bus does not account. For example, in the Mexico City coffee houses Teresa recalls, something of the essential spirit of the Mexican land continues to animate the youth positioned to exercise their political agency, as suggested by her references to volcanoes, lava, and obsidian daggers. These references invoke Mexico’s ancient past, namely the iconic nearby volcanoes Popocatepetl and Iztaccihuatl (which represent mythic, star-crossed, Mexica lovers) and the obsidian dagger (the weapon used for blood sacrifices to Huitzilopochtli, the central God of the Mexica). The veiled yet discernable connection Teresa makes between urban activists and ancient Mexico is more analogous to Teresa’s own experience of cultural identity than that which she ascribes to Mexican Indians.

As she does with the urban activists, Teresa identifies in herself a vital and ancient indigenous core but one that is somewhat veiled and not fully accessible—as exemplified by references peppered throughout the book to Coatlicue (the Mexica earth goddess) during moments of particular closeness with Alicia and fleeting experiences of gender autonomy—as I discuss in greater detail below. Coatlicue, who has the power to create and destroy, symbolizes the female independence and power Teresa strives for but which U.S. and Mexican social norms squelch. Coatlicue is a fleeting ideal, casually invoked but never lingered upon; she is, like the volcanoes and obsidian dagger of the Mexico City coffee shop, a shadowy presence associated with the innate passions of those who resist the current social order. However, greater knowledge of Coatlicue and Mexican history might allow Teresa to see more continuity between past and present. Indeed, by the late days of the Mexica empire, female deities like Coatlicue were
suppressed and male deities elevated—a shift reflective of the Mexicas’ embrace of patriarchal ideologies and social structures (see Anzaldúa, Chapter 3, and Massacre Chapter 3). Bearing the patriarchal aspects of the pre-Columbian period of the late Mexica and Mayan tribes in mind might allow Teresa to see more consistency between the machismo demonstrated by Alvaro Pérez Pérez (one of her Mexican boyfriends) and the indigenous past to which she links him.\textsuperscript{16}

Restrictive gender norms themselves function as another link between Teresa’s two Mexicos—a significant fact in light of her primary motivation for fleeing the States. Her initial perception of Mexico as a nurturing soil that will facilitate her development as an autonomous woman—separated and geographically removed from her husband—is contradicted quickly by the judgments she and Alicia consistently receive there due to traveling without a male chaperon. Teresa writes,

> How revolting we were, susceptible to ridicule, abuse, disrespect. We would have hoped for respect as human beings, but the only respect granted a woman is that which a gentleman bestows upon the lady. Clearly, we were no ladies. What was our greatest transgression? We traveled alone. (65)

Not only does Mexico refuse Teresa her desired homecoming but viscerally rejects her. It appears that her basic humanity cannot be recognized unless she performs her prescribed gender role. In the U.S., Teresa’s mother sees marriage as the vehicle to respectability for her daughter; so too in Mexico is Teresa expected to seek social acceptance through a man. When she and Alicia refuse to heed such gender expectations they face rejection, sexual aggression, and even violence (e.g., 84). Teresa comes to see herself and Alicia as two “snags” in Mexico’s “pattern” (65). They cannot be incorporated into Mexico’s social fabric; rather, “Society could do no more than snip us out” (65). Teresa’s experience thus becomes that of many Chicana/os who,
according to Castillo, generally are not welcome in Mexico (*Massacre* 39).

Although Teresa does not make this association herself, at least not explicitly, it seems that gender norms in contemporary Mexico are not too far removed from those she imagines in colonial Mexico, when reflecting that Mixquiahuala took her “back at least to the time of colonial repression of peons and women who hid behind shutters to catch a glimpse of the street with its brusque men” (25). Further still, these perceptions and experiences of gender repression link not only colonial and contemporary Mexico but also the contemporary United States that Teresa flees. The connection Teresa draws between female repression and colonization nonetheless hints at the possibility that the unity of culture and gender autonomy she seeks is a part of her ancestral inheritance—*prior* to colonization—but remains irrevocably out of her reach. But this past is only hinted at and the world of ancient, indigenous Mexico remains hazy and unspecific; it is, primarily, an idealized foil to Teresa’s experiences of contemporary Mexico and the U.S.

The repressive gender norms Teresa repeatedly encounters are in fact one of *Letters’* consistent threads and thus illustrate that women’s experiences on either side of the border are not as different as she had hoped. In this way *Letters* begins to unravel what Mary Pat Brady defines as the logic of the border, which involves “crossing from one temporality to another. Built into the loose term *border* is the static, modernist concept of difference that depends on the veiled separation of time and space” (50). Instead Teresa confronts the complexities of the borderlands as Gloria Anzaldúa describes them. Anzaldúa explains, “A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition” (25).

To find herself in the ambiguity of the borderlands entails the painful realization that
Teresa, like Anzaldúa, is not quite at home anywhere she goes (Anzaldúa 102). Teresa’s experience becomes that of Anzaldúa’s quintessential mestiza, who is

Cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems, la mestiza undergoes a struggle of the flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war. Like all people, we perceive the version of reality that one culture communicates. Like others having or living in more than one culture, we get multiple, often opposing messages. The coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference causes un choque, a cultural collision” (100).

Anzaldúa argues that the various cultures in which the mestiza finds herself attack each other and the mestiza herself inhabits “a constant state of mental nepantlism” (100). Teresa likewise suffers the realization that some part of her resonates with life on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border but she never feels fully welcome in either country. Consequently, she continues to travel back and forth (with three trips documented in Letters) in search of that which she is missing. This feeling of homelessness on the part of the mestiza is in fact characteristic of Castillo’s oeuvre and has been much discussed by her critics.17

Teresa finds, as I noted above, that, as in the U.S., her only path for respectability in Mexico must be forged through a heterosexual relationship. Perhaps in concession to this reality, while sustaining her desire to connect with Mexican indigeneity, she is drawn to Mexican men with some link to their indigenous heritage. Teresa notes, for example, that she and Alvaro are “drawn to each other by the Indian spirit of mutual ancestors” and that, “Above all else there was our intense devotion to the culture that had preceded European influence” (54-55). Teresa’s emphasis on ancestral links between herself and Alvaro confirms her connection to Mexico and her indigenous identity while reinforcing a conception of the indigenous as located in the pre-
Columbian past—prior to European influence and the complexities of cross-cultural negotiation that shape the experiences of Chicanas like Teresa. Shared devotion to a culture that “preceded European influence” again implies that indigenous cultures are not present today—at least not in the unadulterated form that Teresa might desire. Such an expectation of cultural purity is suggestive of a static pre-Columbian indigeneity (which denies the cross-cultural exchanges that historically occurred between tribes and the fact that all cultures change over time—phenomena that Almanac details extensively). Yet, as much as Teresa tries to isolate this indigenous connection with Alvaro as a basis for their relationship and to affirm her own indigeneity, she is frustrated by behavior Anzaldúa characterizes as “false machismo” exercised to counteract racial subordination in the larger culture (105). Ultimately Alvaro’s loutish behavior (e.g., drunkenness and persistent sexual demands), which cause Teresa doubts about “his legitimate status with the human race,” trump whatever cultural affinities she saw between them and prompt her to leave him (54). On the whole, the combination of Teresa’s attraction to indigenous Mexican cultures and aversion to the patriarchal gender norms she finds in Mexico lead her to see the country as a place that “embraces as it strangulates” (65).

This binary vision of Mexico (as both nurturing and threatening), along with Teresa’s tendency to see through contemporary Mexico to some element of its past, places the Letters in yet another ideological tradition: that of the Infernal Paradise. As Daniel Cooper Alarcón explains, the myth of Mexico as an Infernal Paradise (which he dates back to the sixteenth century) has been perpetuated through a variety of literary and social discourses and perceives Mexico as a place of paradoxical extremes (40, 45). Teresa’s ultimate assessment of Mexico, as a place whose embrace also presents the threat of death (via strangulation), certainly substantiates such a view. The Infernal Paradise myth, like Vanishing Indian myth, has a temporally fixed
element in that it presents Mexico as timeless and ahistorical—allowing it to function as a backdrop for a protagonist’s personal quest (40). Teresa’s and Alicia’s artistic development and Teresa’s spiritual, almost fantastic reflections, captured in a handful of letters, fit this mold; only in the context of Letters it is primarily Teresa, not a Euroamerican protagonist, who utilizes Mexico as a fantasy space in which to work out her own anxieties and achieve a sort of spiritual transcendence. Letter Twenty-One, written in third-person and in a poetic style demonstrative of Teresa’s craft, contains the following reflection about the women’s travels:

There are words between them, not many, but one will speak and the other nods her head seriously. What do they say to each other? How intimate they are! What language do they speak? One picked up a dead branch and lingeringly drew something in the sand. She drew a snake. S. She draws another snake. S. Two snakes. S.S. She was obsessed with snakes. The snake woman, Coatlicue. (72)

Here the two women achieve serenity and a sense of belonging through their shared intimacy. Mexico becomes a backdrop for the development of their friendship and their crafts—manifest through both Teresa’s writing and arguably Alicia’s (the artist’s) drawing in the sand. Their remove from their environment is underscored by their silence, their inscrutable means of communicating with one another, and their connection to Coatlicue. The refuge the women achieve is in a distinctively female space; their inner journeys, the profound intimacy of their relationship, and the invocation of Coatlicue, are deeply intertwined. Here Castillo, through her characters and like many Chicana writers and artists, references Mexica female deities as a source of female autonomy and indigenous identity. As Alicia Arrizón notes, “The ‘native’ body’s presence in Chicana (and Latina) cultural productions and critical theory becomes a metaphor for the processes of the political unconscious” (32). She continues, “In their present
situation as neocolonial subjects in the United States [...] many Chicana/Latina artists look at the symbols of the indigenous as a form of resistance and cultural reaffirmation” (37). By signifying Coatlicue’s body in snake form, Alicia highlights Coatlicue’s most powerful and threatening qualities—a gesture that can be read as both responsive to and anticipatory of the multiple forms of male aggression she and Teresa experience. Calling upon Coatlicue is a means of finding a powerful female antecedent the women can embody so as to carve out a safe, feminine, space.

The feelings of transcendence Teresa achieves (through communion with Alicia and their suggested connection to Mexico’s indigenous, female past) are, in fact, fleeting. The same letter that recalls these experiences concludes with drunken men repeatedly harassing the women and failing to respect their desire for privacy (74). Again, we see that it is both the adherence to a mythic vision of Mexico and the crumbling of that vision through first-hand experience that precludes Teresa’s desire to feel genuinely at home there. Teresa’s feeling of transcendence is predicated on a certain remove from her material surroundings and is shattered by yet another reminder that restrictive gender norms plague her on both sides of the border.

Further, the oversimplified, anachronistic portrayals of indigenous peoples reflected in *Letters* not only impede Teresa’s desired cultural recovery and perpetuate damaging colonialist fictions, but also risk sustaining and exacerbating tensions between Chicana/os and Indians in both the U.S. and Mexico. In fact, one could argue that a fundamental aim of many American Indians is to assert their continued presence in the United States and vocalize the complexities of their daily lives as members of what the U.S. government deems “domestic dependent nations” (Cherokee Nation v. the State of Virginia, 1831) while fighting for broader recognition of their sovereignty and respect for their treaty rights. *Almanac of the Dead* is itself a testament to five hundred years of indigenous resistance, as it interweaves accounts of anti-colonial insurgencies
with the stories of contemporary revolutionaries and those against whom they fight.

Whereas Teresa perpetuates conceptions of Mexican Indians as hermetically sealed in a pre-Columbian and static past in *Letters, Almanac* dramatizes the ongoing vitality of indigenous ideologies as anticolonial tools. As Miriam Schacht explains,

> The spirits of the ancestors are a part of the land, and they are what allow the tribal army to succeed. This, then, is the paradox of Silko’s Indigeneity: Indigenous people are disempowered, but through their connection to the land, they have great power. [...] Indigenous internationalism is, at its heart, about the continuing presence of the ancient in a modern world and the understanding that ancient and modern, rooted and international, local and global, fixed and traveling, are not oppositional pairs and need not be in contradiction with, but are instead complementary to, each other. (68-9)

Schacht goes on to discuss how migration functions in the novel as a means of dismantling colonial structures (e.g. nation-state borders), and achieving intertribal alliances directed toward indigeneous land reclamation and the right to self-determination. She argues that, while connection to tribal land is paramount to the novel’s indigenous revolutionaries, migration is a means of asserting one’s cultural fidelity, not abandoning it. Teresa’s migration can be read as a small-scale representation of this type of movement, as she travels in the pattern of her indigenous ancestors, even though she lacks certain historical, tribally-specific knowledge of indigenous Mexico. However, whereas Teresa journeys to reclaim a sense of cultural identity, *Almanac*’s revolutionaries travel to reclaim their lands and sociopolitical rights. *Almanac*’s indigenous characters draw deeply upon traditional knowledge and (hi)stories, but do so as a means of negotiating their contemporary circumstances—thereby demonstrating the adaptability and vitality of traditional knowledge in the modern world.¹⁹ We might interpret Teresa’s and
Alicia’s calling upon a strong indigenous precursor, i.e., Coatlicue, as a similar gesture, but one whose efficacy is undermined by the persistent gender-based oppression to which they fall prey and the temporal remove at which they place indigeneity itself. Characters in *Almanac*, by contrast, who dismiss or deny contemporary indigenous peoples and epistemologies do so at their own peril. Whereas in *Letters* misperception of indigenous peoples comes at personal cost for Teresa, misperception and underestimation of indigenous peoples and the force of their worldviews have catastrophic, hemispheric consequences in *Almanac*.

Although some of the differences between the novels reflect distinctive experiences of colonization and identity formation experienced by American Indians versus Chicana/os, as I discuss in more detail below, they are also indicative of the particular concerns and aims of *Letters* versus *Almanac*. I concur with Shari Huhndorf’s claim that *Almanac*’s primary focus is on indigenous lands, rather than indigenous cultures—one of the factors, she suggests, that differentiates *Almanac* from nationalist American Indian literature. Huhndorf contends that *Almanac* argues for pan-tribal alliances based on shared histories of colonization and related political concerns; questions of culture, which are more tribally specific, are subordinated and even distorted at times, according to Huhndorf, in the interest of making the case for the common cause of indigenous peoples throughout the Western hemisphere (157). Nonetheless, given that racialized, colonially-derived social hierarchies are among the oppressive forces under attack in the novel, culture and cultural identity formation remain critical threads in the novel’s vast fabric—as I will demonstrate through my reading of Menardo. In many ways this relation between culture and land politics is inverted in *Letters*. Culture is matched only by gender as the novel’s chief concern, but the drive to reclaim cultural identity is spurred by the dislocation of the Chicana/o diaspora—itself part of the Americas’ colonial legacy—and is addressed through
migration toward a geographically located conception of indigeneity. Both Letters and Almanac, in short, are anticolonial narratives that seek to unravel, albeit differentially, colonialist legacies of displacement and dispossession.

At the center of Silko’s 768-page tome, with its diverse cast of dozens of characters is the ancient prophecy that all things European will disappear from the Americas and indigenous peoples will reclaim their lands. It is this prophecy that guarantees the ultimate success of the revolutionaries’ efforts and provides a point of connection between characters dispersed in space and time (as represented on the “Five Hundred Year Map” of the Americas within the novel’s front matter). The novel signals the indigenous land reclamation to come, as Huhndorf suggests, by recreating colonized spaces (major regions of which serve as section titles) “as storied landscapes that contrast with the ‘blank spaces’ of colonial cartography” (142). In a 1998 interview, Silko explains that “the old prophesies say, not that the Europeans will disappear. But the purely European way of looking at this place and relationships” (10). Referring to Almanac itself, Channette Romero rightly suggests that “all things European” is best understood in the novel as the destructive and divisive aspects of European/Euroamerican culture that generate environmental degradation and socioeconomic inequalities; the prophecy does not entail an absolute rejection of all peoples or knowledge related to Europe (626). This interpretation certainly “fits more closely with the Keresan tradition of incorporating those things from the dominant culture necessary for survival” (626). In fact, the revolutionary army’s appropriation of European technologies and ideologies for their own ends illustrates that “all things European” should not be understood in an overly simplistic or absolute sense; Romero and other scholars (myself included), generally agree that it is the destructive aspects of European culture, which have driven over five hundred years of colonization in the Americas, that are attacked and
marked as bound for elimination in the novel.

As Romero indicates, to borrow from other cultures, to adapt and change to survive, is a traditional Keresan practice. Indeed, one of Silko’s guiding philosophies is that a divisive worldview runs counter to traditional indigenous practices. She reflects,

Even for the old folks I grew up with, the Indian way is to learn how a person is inside their heart, not by skin color or affiliation. That criticism grows out of more of a non-Indian way of looking at things. That's why the indigenous people welcomed the newcomers. They didn't draw lines like that. […] In the old way, the old folks would say, just like in Almanac, all of those who love the earth and want to do this are welcome. […] That attitude about nationalism comes in much later, that's much more a European way of looking at things. (10)

This traditional view of how best to assess another person and which values are embraced by indigenous peoples comes through strongly in Almanac and throughout Silko’s work. To be indigenous or allied with the indigenous revolutionary movements at the novel’s core has more to do with an ideological commitment to treat the natural world with respect and restoring the land to its original inhabitants than to any ontological, colonially-imposed, notion of identity. As Sequoyah Magdaleno explains, the very act of defining “Indian” identity was forced on American Indians by the U.S. government:

The first twist in the productive logic of the category “Indian” is the question, “What is an Indian?” officially posed in the report by the U.S. Commissioner of Indian Affairs in 1892. Answers have been sought in ontological terms codified as “blood-quantum,” or alternatively ascribed on the basis of the dominant culture’s perceptions of “Indian” ways of life. The problem with both notions, of course, is that these criteria of Indianness do
not necessarily coincide; the categorical logic of identity is countered by the possibility of being officially non-Indian while being genealogically a “full-blood” living in a traditional Indian community. (89)

Alliances in *Almanac* between culturally and regionally diverse characters, forged around shared commitments to fundamental indigenous ideologies, function to upend such externally defined, restrictive, and divisive notions of Indianness. Not only are colonialist ideologies of identity deconstructed through such alliances but, as the revolutionaries cross national borders with impunity, they denaturalize the carving up of the Americas into distinct, and unequal, nation-states. As is the case in *Letters*, travel is a means of unraveling a colonial history of division; whereas the divisions Teresa aims to overcome pertain to components of her cultural identity, *Almanac*’s revolutionaries aim to dismantle hemispheric and colonialist distributions of land, labor, and resources and reclaim the Americas for indigenous peoples.

Notably, the revolutionaries’ advocacy for indigenous peoples’ rights to land and self-determination align with the ideals of the Mexican Revolutionary era that were stamped out with the advent of *indigenismo*. It is therefore noteworthy that one of the novel’s prominent Destroyers (i.e., those who embrace the destructive, capitalist ethos associated with colonial powers and their descendents in the Americas) is a Mexican named Menardo, introduced in a chapter entitled simply, “Mestizo.” Silko has noted that *Almanac*’s characters are more mythical than real, and can therefore be read as allegorical types, not as individuals.21 Menardo’s role as the novel’s representative mestizo thus merits careful consideration and, as I argue below, takes on particular significance when evaluated relative to Mexican and Chicana/o discourses of mestizaje. His character raises questions about whether or not *Almanac* perpetuates a conception of indigeneity exclusive of Mexicana/os. It is my contention that *Almanac* critiques the way in
which mestizaje has been crafted as a cultural construct. The novel affirms the indigenous ancestry of characters identified as mestizo or Mexican but (in contrast with characters living in Mexico identified as Indians) suggests that this identification entails a severing of substantive knowledge of or connection to Indian cultures.

Menardo allegorizes not only mestizo identity but, more significantly, the process of becoming mestizo within Mexico’s sociopolitical power structure. Menardo’s coming of age experience is defined by his recognition that economic success and social acceptance are contingent upon his abandonment of his indigenous heritage. Here Menardo submits to a dualistic mindset that pits indigeneity against mestizaje—and precludes the synthesis that defines Anzaldúa’s new mestiza consciousness—and opts for the privileged category (Anzaldúa 81). This mindset is consistent with the divisive and destructive impulse of Almanac’s Destroyers and runs counter to Keresan inclusivity. Menardo’s experience suggests that any embrace of indigenous heritage in Mexican national discourse is rendered insubstantial by a Eurocentric, racialized socioeconomic structure and ubiquitous anti-Indian sentiment. Silko dramatizes the process of confronting and internalizing racism when Menardo’s teachers inform him that his grandfather’s stories, which he has always enjoyed, are “pagan.” Menardo then realizes the “awful truth” that his grandfather is an Indian, and severs their relationship. The Church, as represented by Menardo’s teacher (a Catholic brother) socializes Menardo, along with his classmates, to dismiss indigenous knowledge—which is reflective of the institutionalized racism in Mexican society that belies twentieth-century nationalist discourse.

In the context of a novel in which indigenous stories are repeatedly referenced as the only means of survival in a world ravaged by self-interest and greed, when Menardo turns his back on his grandfather and his grandfather’s stories, we understand that Menardo has embarked upon a
destructive path. His early education, we soon learn, is just the first step toward his ultimate role as an instrument of neocolonial power. Menardo’s success, as owner of Universal Insurance, is achieved by insuring corporations, state officials, and the wealthy against “agitators,” which makes Menardo an enemy of the revolution (e.g., 291). With business success come opportunities for Menardo to enter Mexican high society, as his wealth facilitates his marriage into one of the oldest families in Tuxtla Gutiérrez. Further, his wife, Iliana, “had been reminded, every day since she was three years old, that her great-great-grandfather on her mother’s side had descended from the conquistador De Oñate” (269). This celebratory reference to Oñate as part of Iliana’s upbringing and cultivated sense of identity functions as shorthand for the ways in which colonially-based, racialized social hierarchies are perpetuated. On one hand, Oñate is celebrated by some Mexicanos (on either side of the U.S.-Mexico border) for leading the first Spanish colonists into New Mexico and founding its first capital (Santa Fe). On the other hand, he is infamous for his brutality against Pueblo Indians who resisted Spanish appropriation of tribal lands, Catholicism, and the encomienda system. In response to the murder of Spanish soldiers by Acoma warriors, for instance, Oñate and his army killed at least eight hundred Acoma men and enslaved many women and children. By 1608, the Spanish crown had removed Oñate from New Mexico’s governorship and tried him for abusing his power. That competing views of colonial history, and Oñate specifically, continue to be culturally divisive is illustrated by numerous debates (which often pitted American Indian against Mexican American communities) that occurred throughout the U.S. Southwest regarding fourth centennial celebrations of Spanish settlement. Silko’s brief reference to Oñate invokes the complex colonial history that has influenced identity formation and cross-cultural perceptions between Indians and Mexicana/os.

By aspiring to marry into the Eurocentric upper-echelon of Mexican society, Menardo
compounds his elective estrangement from his Indian grandfather (and his family as a whole) by tacitly endorsing colonization and the attendant subjugation of indigenous peoples. Severing all ties to his origins aligns him with the European inhabitants of the Americans, whom Menardo’s grandfather describes as having flimsy attachments to their children, one another, and their homeland. He calls them “orphan people,” abandoned by their first parents and unable to recognize the earth as mother (258). That Menardo would then put his business to the service of those at the top of a neocolonial socioeconomic power structure is just one additional step in his steady development into a Destroyer. Indeed, critics frequently reference Menardo to illustrate what it means to be a Destroyer in *Almanac*. What critics have overlooked, however, are Menardo’s adaptations of his grandfather’s lessons to advance his socioeconomic goals. In other words, although he internalizes the values and biases of the Mexican elite, he nonetheless (unwittingly) retains aspects of his indigenous upbringing. Menardo demonstrates how ancestral wisdom can be distorted and corrupted in a colonial, capitalist context by using the listening skills he acquired through spending time his grandfather (271), crafting compelling and entertaining narratives to woo potential clients (261), and acting on the knowledge his grandfather gave him of the chaos and violence of the current age, the Reign of Death-Eye Dog (260) to his own professional benefit. Menardo’s (mis)use of indigenous knowledge is nonetheless a testament to its continued vitality and adaptability. Of course, Menardo’s lack of self-awareness regarding these corrupted vestiges of indigenous knowledge manifest in his hatred of the “Indian quality” of telling people what they want to hear—the very same quality that allows him to be a successful businessman (276).

*Almanac*’s portrait of mestizaje as entailing estrangement from and/or rejection of indigenous identity is not confined to Menardo but is generalized—and made transnational—
through the observations of Sterling, a Laguna Pueblo man who has been banished from his homeland (due to his failure to prevent a Hollywood movie crew from filming a sacred stone snake that had surfaced on the reservation). Shortly after he arrives in Tucson, Arizona (the convergence point for the novel’s revolutionaries), Sterling realizes that people he had been used to calling “Mexicans” were really remnants of different kinds of Indians. But what had remained of what was Indian was in appearance only—the skin and the hair and the eyes. The cheekbones and nose like eagles and hawks. They had lost contact with their tribes and their ancestors’ worlds. (88)

Sterling goes on to lament the historic and continued separation of indigenous peoples globally from their tribes and homelands. In light of his banishment, his lamentation suggests empathy toward those who are displaced or disconnected from their origins—a plight he ascribes to colonization. Sterling’s reflection about indigenous displacement leads Romero to conclude that Silko “disrupts the idea of any one ‘pure’ race and ethnicity” and suggests that correlating race or ethnicity with political commitments denies historical alliances and contemporary affinities between indigenous peoples of different tribes, regions, and nations (634).

Although I agree that with this assessment of Almanac’s argument generally, Romero overlooks Sterling’s idiosyncratic treatment of Mexicans; Sterling paints all Mexicana/os with the brush of fragmented and surface indigeneity. Menardo and his upper-class associates function in the novel to substantiate this view. Not only does Sterling see a lack of substantive indigeneity on the part of Mexicana/os, but also implies that a recovery of such a connection is unlikely, due to their remaining Indianness being but “remnants” further splintered by being comprised of “different kinds of Indians.” One might argue that, in a novel in which ideological commitments trump ancestry, Mexicana/os could recover meaningful connections to their
indigeneity. However, the Mexican indigeneity Sterling recognizes, and was ostensibly fooled by, is phenotypic; it is a lack of cultural knowledge and tribal connection that leads Sterling to his conclusions about Mexicans. Thus, once again, Silko dismisses biological criteria for Indian identity and privileges matters of culture, experience, and ideology—a gesture characteristic of Silko oeuvre. However, reading *Almanac* in conversation with *Letters*, Chicana/o Studies scholarship, and Chicana/o experiences deeply problematizes the use of “mestizo” as shorthand for severed indigeneity and Sterling’s similar observations about Mexicana/os. Not only do these aspects of the novel distort and homogenize Mexicana/o experiences, but can be interpreted as invalidating the efforts of some Mexicana/os to recover what may have been fragmented and denigrated in the course of colonization.

The implications of this thread of *Almanac* can be assessed further when read alongside Castillo’s assertion that “by U.S. standards and according to some North American Native Americans, I cannot make official claims to being India [Indian]” (21). Here Castillo alludes to U.S. governmental criteria for establishing American Indian identity (e.g., blood quantum, Native language proficiency, and residence on a reservation) so as to obtain certain government services, which led to a shift in some tribal norms of acceptance (away from cultural connection and kinship ties). Silko and other American Indian scholars have advocated a restoration of pre-colonial standards of inclusion—in Silko’s case most famously through her 1977 novel *Ceremony*, which centers on the argument that mixedbloods have a vital role to play, as cross-cultural mediators, in the survival of their tribes. Of course Tayo, *Ceremony*’s mixedblood protagonist, has a direct (though sometimes fraught) connection to the Laguna Pueblo community of his maternal ancestors, as does *Almanac*’s Sterling, who ultimately returns to his homeland.
Many mestiza/os or Mexicana/os, by contrast, cannot identify their specific tribal origin due to such factors as intermarriage, Mexican construction of a national mestizo identity (which, at least nominally, incorporated indigeneity into the dominant culture), migration, and assimilation. Consequently, Castillo asserts, they must act as archeologists to reconstruct their identities (Massacre 6). She notes that many identify with the Aztecs because this is the Mexican tribe about which most is commonly known, not because the majority are of Aztec descent (Milligan 22). Many Chicana/os, like Castillo and her character Teresa, therefore operate with a more visceral sense of their own indigeneity, rather than one defined through ties to a tribal community. Invocation of the histories and values of the Mexica/Aztecs may thus stand in as a broad representation of Mexican indigeneity.

The problematic elements of Almanac’s conception of mestiza/o identity noted, Silko’s critique of Mexican discourse regarding official articulations of mestizo identity is not unfounded. As I discussed above, Mexico has a history of nominal celebrations of cultural pluralism that fail to address Indians’ political rights and socioeconomic circumstances. Even after Mexico’s 1990 Constitutional Amendment, which officially declared the nation pluriethnic, many scholars argue that practical effects remain to be seen (e.g., Maybury-Lewis xvi). Indeed, on both sides of the border, Mexicana/os historically denied their indigenous ancestry in favor of their Spanish ancestry—often in the interest of maintaining or advancing their socioeconomic position, itself a manifestation of colonial power structures that operated according to a constructed indigenous/savage versus European/civilized binary. However, Silko’s representation of mestizaje turns a blind eye toward explicit redefinitions and articulations of this identity as one that affirms the indigenous self while embracing the Spanish elements as well. For instance, with “I Am Joaquin” (1967), a foundational poem of the Chicano movement,
Rudolfo Gonzales aimed to reconcile what he envisions as a war in the blood of Mexican Americans, in part by claiming the indigenous ancestry historically suppressed in Mexican and Mexican American communities. Gonzales, like other members of the Chicano movement, signified his embrace of his indigenous ancestry by identifying as a Chicano, a word etymologically linked to the Mexica tribe (see Rinderle 304 and Pérez-Torres “Refiguring Aztlán” 18). In “I Am Joaquin,” Gonzales dramatizes the internal struggle engendered by mixedblood identity. He writes,

I am Cuahitémoc,

Proud and Noble

Leader of men,

King of an empire,

civilized beyond the dreams

of the Gachupín Cortés,

Who is also the blood,

the image of myself […]

I am the Eagle and Serpent of

the Aztec civilization.

I owned the land as far as the eye

could see under the crown of Spain,

and I toiled on my earth

and gave my Indian sweat and blood

for the Spanish master,

Who ruled with tyranny over man and beast and all that he could trample
But…

THE GROUND WAS MINE

I was both tyrant and slave (17)

Joaquín, a Chicano everyman, expresses pride over his Indian ancestry and, in so doing, asserts a land claim—in the face of U.S. colonization—via toil and occupancy prior to European colonization. At the same time, he sees his own image in Cortés, whom he refers to as a Gachupín (a word for native Spaniards who settle in the Americas, often used pejoratively), and does not shy away from dramatizing the cruelty with which his Spanish ancestors treated his indigenous ancestors. In so doing he validates Silko’s representation of the European presence in the Americas as fundamentally destructive, yet refuses to fall prey to binary, colonial logic by casting out any component of his identity. In a manner analogous to Anzaldúa’s “new mestiza,” Joaquín synthesizes his full ancestral history and multiple bloodlines to generate a new identity that reflects his experience and sense of self.

Importantly, after exhaustively detailing Chicana/os’ history and various ancestral lines, Joaquín declares that his “blood is pure” (29). Joaquín thereby upends a fundamental component of colonial discourse, which generates divisions and inequalities based on racialized social hierarchies—the very hierarchies that compel Menardo to pretend that his nose (which he sees as the only conspicuously Indian part of his physiognomy) was flattened by a boxing injury. “Without the family nose,” Silko writes, “Menardo might have passed for one of sangre limpia [pure blood]” (259). Although Joaquín articulates his mestizaje as a form of resistance against Euroamerican hegemony, he does not offer an easy reconciliation between the cultures he feels warring in his blood; this war is itself an essential part of him. Instead, he claims Indian and Spanish ancestry as valuable components of his identity as a Chicano in the contemporary U.S.
Joaquín’s revolutionary mestizaje aligns with Castillo’s assertion that “The very act of self-definition is a rejection of colonization” (12). Almanac also substantiates this view. One of the key factors that makes Almanac revolutionary text itself is its insistence on the continued right of indigenous peoples to define themselves according to their own distinctive ideologies and cultures; in fact, doing so enables them to undermine destructive manifestations of colonialism. Consequently, Almanac’s narrow and largely pejorative construction of mestizaje might seem to contradict its fundamental assumptions.

Nonetheless, Letters and Almanac can be understood as manifestations of a shared history shaped by both common and distinctive experiences of colonization and identity formation. Teresa’s and Menardo’s characters manifest the pain of nepantla, as shaped by their specific national and cultural circumstances. Although Menardo chooses early and decisively to disavow his indigeneity, he is never free of the insecurity that attends performing an identity that is not his own and inhabiting a hostile social space. No amount of money frees Menardo of snide comments made by the elite about his color, his perceived background, or his clumsy attempts to mimic upper-class norms. Indeed, his new money status engenders resentment from many of those he aims to call his equals. Although Menardo represents the destructive ethos under attack in the novel, his relentless insecurities and his failure to ever really fit into high society inspire some degree of compassion.27

Critical discussions that address Menardo as a quintessential Destroyer fail to account for the techniques Silko uses to draw his character in a more complex, sympathetic, and tragic fashion. Menardo is the only character in this highly populated novel ever given a first person perspective, which invites readers to identify more closely with him than with many of the revolutionaries.28 Silko’s rendering of Menardo’s persistent self-consciousness, along with the
scorn he receives from nearly every sector of society (from members of high society to his Indian chauffeur, Tacho, who calls him a “yellow monkey”) arguably invites compassion from readers. At the same time, it provides further evidence that *Almanac* offers a strong critique of articulations of mestizaje that fail to genuinely embrace indigeneity. For Menardo, the pressure he feels to flee his indigenous heritage and align himself with the Western world lead to devastating consequences. He goes so far as to place his complete trust in a bulletproof vest (to protect him against the indigenous revolutionary uprising), and forces Tacho to shoot him in order to demonstrate the vest’s effectiveness. As Rebecca Tillett notes, Menardo embraces the dominant view that indigenous ideologies are superstitious but cultivates a view of Western technology that is itself a form of superstition (164). Menardo’s foolhardiness is punctuated absolutely when the vest fails him and he dies.

The prophecy at the center of *Almanac*, that all things European will disappear from the Americas, is a function of the end of the Reign of Death Eye Dog—the colonial epoch. Not only is this epoch defined by destruction (a force Menardo ultimately directs, albeit inadvertently, toward himself), but a hyper-masculinity that has destroyed the natural balance between masculine and feminine qualities. Teresa’s experiences of cultural alienation and false machismo can thus be understood as symptomatic of this colonial period as well—and therefore illustrates the degree to which these novels participate in an overlapping colonial narrative.

By way of conclusion I will elaborate briefly on my opening suggestion that my comparative reading of *Almanac* and *Letters* would illustrate the need for more frequent and nuanced comparative analyses of American Indian and Chicana/o literatures. As is the case with these two novels, much of American Indian and Chicana/o literature addresses, in one way or another, issues of cultural identity and social justice that pertain to colonization and its vestiges.
The significant overlaps in the histories and cultures manifested in these literary traditions reflect the communities’ differential subject positions in the colonial palimpsest of the Americas. Reading these novels in light of one another calls attention to both their shared participation in a broader colonial narrative and the problematic elements of some of their strategies of resistance. *Letters* and *Almanac* encapsulate fundamental struggles of cultural identity formation and reclamation that derive from colonially imposed social structures and related diasporic migrations. They address the functions of traditional indigenous knowledge in negotiating contemporary circumstances as marginalized subjects in the neocolonial conditions of Mexico, the U.S., and the borderlands conditions engendered by the geographic and sociopolitical structures that define these nations.

Comparative analyses of American Indian and Chicana/o literature enlarge the critical framework within which colonial history and the contemporary realities of U.S. subaltern communities can be discussed. *Letters* calls attention to *Almanac'*s reductive representation of mestizaje, whereas *Almanac* illuminates *Letters'* perpetuation of a historically located indigeneity that has been used by Mexico and the United States to justify and perpetuate indigenous dispossession. *Almanac’s* Destroyers dismiss indigenous peoples as backward and irrelevant to modern affairs, but do so at their own peril. The novel’s indigenous revolutionaries insist upon their presence and their rights, while drawing upon and adapting traditional knowledge to effect the social changes they seek. The indigenous revolutionaries thus testify to the marginalizing effects of colonialist discourse (including that which Teresa deploys through her anachronistic representations of Indians), while countering its underlying assumptions. The indigenous revolutionaries’ diversity, vitality, and adaptability function as correctives to the ubiquitous image of the pre-modern Indian perpetuated through Mexican *indigenismo*, U.S. colonialist
discourse, and Teresa’s letters.

The novels thus reflect distinctive strategies of identity formation and resistance deployed by Indians and Mexicana/os in the centuries following European occupation of the Americas. The tensions between the novels speak to the ways in which communities differentially subject to colonial power structures sometimes deploy mechanisms of resistance that disempower the other, due in part to an internalization of colonial discourse without reference to the experiences of the other. Joint discussion of American Indian and Chicana/o literatures, sociopolitical discourses and struggles has the potential to prompt confrontation with historical and cultural inheritances that both unite and divide them, and may allow for the development of strategies of resistance that more broadly dismantle contemporary manifestations of colonialist discourse that sustain inequalities that both communities share and fight against.

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Notes:

1 I use the term Mexicana/o to refer to people of Mexican descent generally, whether residents of Mexico or the U.S.

2 Rinderle compellingly argues that peoples of Mexican descent residing in the U.S. constitute a Mexican diaspora. She also discusses the distinctive terminology used by Mexicana/o diasporic subgroups vis-à-vis their particular experiences and ideologies. See Pérez-Torres for analysis of characteristic features of Chicana/o and Mexicana/o diaspora (“Refiguring Aztlán,” 107).

3 In *Feminism on the Border*, Saldívar-Hull discusses the failure of the Chicano Movement to address the specific concerns of women and of Euroamerican feminism to account for the ways
in which gender experience is shaped by race. She contends that, “As women whose daily existence confronts institutionalized racism, class exploitation, sexism, and homophobia, U.S. Third World women do not enjoy the luxury of privileging one oppression over another” (48).

4 Here Walter invokes Anzaldúa’s application of the Nahuatl word “nepantla” (meaning torn between or in the middle) to the mestiza/o borderlands condition.

5 Tanya Bennett offers an extended analysis of the ways in which these and other formal devices Castillo utilizes in her crafting of Letters align with Teresa’s quest for a coherent identity.

6 Building upon Debra Castillo’s observation that Teresa is drawn to many of the same “exotic” Mexican sites as the average tourist (149), Cooper characterizes Teresa as having a “touristic orientation” toward the country that entails only a superficial understanding of its culture and norms (169-170).

7 Since the advent of the Chicano movement, Aztlán and the Mexica migration therefrom has become a powerful referent for many Chicana/os. Aztlán has functioned as a signifier of identity that unites Chicana/os’ current geographic location and indigenous heritage, and/or asserting their legitimate presence and land claims in the U.S. via rights of first occupancy. See Pérez-Torres, “Refiguring Aztlán,” for a detailed discussion of the various conceptions, origins, and utilizations of Aztlán by Chicana/os.

8 Roughly one million Mexicans migrated to the United States between 1910 and 1930 to obtain work and/or political asylum due to the upheavals wrought in Mexico by the 1910 Revolution (Gutiérrez, 90).

9 See Walter 85 and the whole of Bennett’s “No Country to Call Home.”

10 See, for example, Delgadillo, as well as Gillman and Floyd-Thomas.

For discussion of the Chicano movement’s selective appropriation of Mexican history and the related consequences thereof, see Alarcón.

For additional discussion of the implications of the myth of the Vanishing Indian for contemporary American Indians, see Womack, e.g., 65-66.

For detailed accounts of popular perceptions of American Indians in the U.S., as they developed and persisted over time, see Berkhofer and Deloria.

See Levi, 6.

It should be noted, however, that there are hundreds of Mexican Indian tribes, with distinctive cultures, histories, and social norms. Recognition of the patriarchal stage in Mexica and Mayan histories should not be taken as evidence that patriarchy was the norm throughout pre-Columbian indigenous Mexico.

See, for example, Arrizón, Bennett, Bus, and Walter.

Walter likewise links the embrace Teresa feels in Mexico to its indigeneity and the strangulation to its machismo. His assertion that Mexico “embraces her with its indigenous roots,” however, suggests a more unequivocal connection than Teresa in fact achieves. Further, Walter may fall into a similar temporal trap as Teresa herself by evaluating her relationship to Mexican indigeneity with reference only to its historical dimensions (i.e., Mexico’s “indigenous roots”).

Demonstrating the sustained vitality and utility of indigenous knowledge and stories, particularly when they are adapted to accommodate changing circumstances (as she does in her own work), is one of the dominant themes of Silko’s oeuvre and thus a core strain of the sizable body of Silko criticism.
Several critics have argued that the forging of cross-cultural alliances based on shared ideological and political commitments is one of Silko’s characteristic concerns. See, for example, Romero for a more extended discussion of this thread of *Almanac*.

Arnold, 8-9.

This system required native people to supply the Spanish with certain quantities of food and, when poor harvests made it impossible for them to meet these demands, they were forced to perform menial tasks in Spanish households to pay off their alleged debt to the Spaniards.

Hammond and Rey, 712.

See June-Friesen and Horton.

See “A Countryless Woman: The Early Feminista,” chapter one of *Massacre*.

This archaeological impulse plays out in Castillo’s fiction as well. Alvina Quintana, for instance, characterizes *Letters* as “a parody of modern ethnographic and travel writing” (79). Laura Gillman and Stacey Floyd-Thomas, in turn, read the narration of the five women’s lives at the center of Castillo’s 1994 novel *So Far From God* as ethnographic; they discuss the relationship between cultural identity recovery and the self-affirmation and activism of women of color in the novel and in Castillo’s political thought.

For additional discussion of Menardo’s profound faith he places in Western technology, see Tillett.

For a more extensive discussion of the interplay of first and third person in the beginning of Menardo’s story—particularly as it functions to underscore the critical juncture of Menardo’s life at which he turns away from his grandfather and the indigenous ideology his grandfather represents—see Horvitz.
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