

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

The Turquoise Ledge: A Memoir. By Leslie Marmon Silko.

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/25f235th>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 36(4)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

McNeil, Elizabeth

**Publication Date**

2012-09-01

**DOI**

10.17953

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

federal definitions of Indian status, which is nearly exclusively limited to tribal members.

Gover suggests that the United States' approach of essentially borrowing tribal membership guidelines to define the legal category of Indian inadequately limits the category, which is intended to be larger in scope. In arguing the importance of expanding the definition of Indian status to non-member Indians who would be recognized by tribes as Indian, the author shows that because tribal law supports a larger Indian community that encompasses nonmember Indians, the federal category is in conflict with tribal law and threatens that larger community. Notably, an expanded definition would arguably protect Indian status for individuals with ancestral ties to multiple tribes but who do not satisfy the membership criteria for any individual tribe. Ultimately, Gover suggests that her audience consider the role of the federal government in acknowledging Indians, both members and nonmembers, which will certainly become even more of a pressing issue in generations to come.

Overall, *Tribal Constitutionalism* is extremely informative, clear, and well written. Gover succeeds in articulating a particularly confusing research topic and her findings to her audience. Her exploration of tribal membership practices and the historic federal understandings of Indian and tribal members, with all of the many exceptions, is expertly thorough, and supports the research of students and scholars interested in tribal membership and governance, particularly those investigating the tribal and federal legal frameworks surrounding nonmember Indians. Her presentation of tribal trends in membership practices makes her work a truly valuable contribution to the field.

*Leah Shearer*

Harvard University

**The Turquoise Ledge: A Memoir.** By Leslie Marmon Silko. New York: Penguin Group, 2010. 336 pages. \$16.00 paper.

A memoir of place, Leslie Marmon Silko's *The Turquoise Ledge* evokes the earth-focused loveliness of her earlier reflective prose (*Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*, *Sacred Water* (prose poems), *The Delicacy and Strength of Lace*, and *Storyteller*). In a departure from her earlier prose, however, after part one the people in her life are seldom mentioned, since, as she states in the preface, her intention was not "to write about others but instead to construct a self-portrait" (1). In this sometimes quirky, occasionally obsessive narrative, Silko is inspiringly in love with creatures and objects that live with and around

her: horses, dogs, macaws, snakes, rats, wild birds, turquoise rocks, flowers, land, trees, and stars.

The memoir begins in childhood, covering mostly familiar ground of her family relationships while growing up at Laguna Pueblo, but with some poignant new personal information that offers further insight into how Silko's imagination developed. In chapter 5, for example, Silko discusses her preference for solitude as a child, and her enjoyment of what she experienced as the more peaceful world of animals. Immediately following this reflection, she reveals that only in her twenties did she find out that her mother had given up a baby boy for adoption who was born before Silko. Because his absence so deeply haunted her mother throughout her life, this half-brother was also a formative presence for Silko and her sister, shaping their lives through their mother's irremediable loss, depression, and alcoholism. From two brief pages we infer that all of these intertwining aspects—exploring the natural world, seeking peace, living with unspoken grief, and being influenced by intense familial relationships—helped nudge Silko into her lifelong habit of solitary rumination, storytelling, and a life inextricably intertwined with nature and animal companions.

Though the narrative goes on to discuss briefly her young adulthood and two marriages, the majority of the rest of Silko's memoir has to do with her life in the Tucson Mountains since 1978, more than thirty years. Like her far more obsessive and often-misread novel *Almanac of the Dead* (1991), the memories of her reclusive artist's life are sometimes "eccentric" (169), with numerous redundancies that could have been pruned. Despite its editorial shortcomings, the prose of *The Turquoise Ledge* provides a soothing and engrossing solitary experience with Silko and her passions in her chosen mountain landscape.

One of the memoir's fascinations is Nahuatl culture, especially the language. About a third of the way into the book, for example, she lists Nahuatl words in her Nahuatl dictionaries that begin with "c" and have to do with stars, snakes, and dreams (139), then browses the "c"s again a hundred pages later (242). Throughout *The Turquoise Ledge*, her representations of Nahuatl people, language, and beliefs offer insight not only into Silko's thinking, but also into ideas found in her other work, such as *Almanac of the Dead* and *Gardens in the Dunes*. At the core of her vision is Silko's understanding—as a Laguna woman and student of Nahuatl, Hopi, and other indigenous cultures—of the conjoined, embodied realms of matter, weather, flesh, story, spirit, dream, and celestial being, in an all-compassing conceptualization of interrelatedness. Throughout her oeuvre Silko comes back to the idea of stories as powerful entities: "Stories are valuable repositories for details and information of use to future generations" (27). The anecdotes of lived events peppered throughout are significant as impressions on Silko's consciousness, rather than as static and

provable “facts” she has collected to lend authority to her work, brief narrative moments that offer us a window into Silko’s imaginative motivations, as well as suggesting an indigenous perspective on events that is distinct from a “mainstream” white view.

For example, in a short paragraph near the beginning of part 2, Silko briefly discusses that rattlesnake venom is used by the Rarámuri (Tarahumara) to treat cancerous tumors, and used by other peoples for additional medicinal purposes. She ends by mentioning the story of cowboy Clark Stanley, the original charlatan “snake oil salesman” better known as the “Rattlesnake King.” Stanley “claimed to have lived among the Hopi and . . . killed and processed hundreds of snakes” (82). Stanley’s act (handling and killing snakes) was popular at the Chicago 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition, and possibly a direct precursor to the wildly popular and environmentally unsound “Rattlesnake Roundups” that began in the 1920s and occur annually today in seven states. Stanley went on to manufacture his medicinal oil, and it was not until 1917 that he was exposed as a fraud and charged with violating the 1906 Pure Food and Drug Act.

In Silko’s version, Stanley is arrested for fraud at the expo. Silko suggests that Western capitalist promotional events like world’s fairs have held distinct significance for indigenous peoples; indeed, scholars are only beginning to investigate such events from the point of view of indigenous people. At the fairs, indigenous peoples from all over the world were displayed and photographed under the guise of anthropological edification for the white masses, or performatively co-opted, as in the case of the decidedly non-Hopi Stanley’s snake act. Disenfranchised from humanity, they were relegated to the status of anachronistic savages vanishing in the wake of white progress, as was literally acted out in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show just outside the 1893 Expo in his “Drama of Civilization.” These entrepreneurial fairs were hugely influential (nearly a quarter of the US population attended the 1893 Expo). As a way to see the world, observe white culture, and profit from whites’ curiosity, indigenous people also wanted to participate in the fairs, with Geronimo as a famous example. In Silko’s remembered version of the Rattlesnake King story, what seems to have been impressed on her mind is the generally fraudulent nature of misrepresented indigenous knowledge and practices. According to Silko’s memory of Stanley’s snake oil story, that case was so flagrant that even the white authorities took action.

Similar brief anecdotes, such as a discussion of radioactive fallout and desecration of the land at Laguna in the 1950s, together with a stream of life observed in her immediate surroundings, serve to assert Silko’s strong sense of environmental justice. Though Silko writes that before starting *The Turquoise Ledge* she “wanted as much as possible to avoid unpleasantness and strife and

politics,” politics do enter the text in ways both subtle and obvious. Throughout the second half of the book Silko is concerned with a new neighbor who has just built a McMansion up the hill. He repeatedly bulldozes the nearby arroyo for landscaping materials. Though Silko apparently never speaks directly to this “machine man,” she understandably obsesses over his gouging and shifting the landscape she loves. After referring to him as a “dickhead” and several times wishing him dead (269), she finally settles for the comfort of knowing that despite his actions, the arroyo’s powerful seasonal wash will naturally heal the damage over time. Somewhat abruptly, she immediately remarks that this is “a good place to end” the memoir, and does so (319).

In *The Turquoise Ledge* Silko admits that “the process we call ‘memory,’ even recent memory, involves imagination” (1). As a fiction writer she is not interested in representing autobiographical truth, but is most comfortable making herself a fictional character through bits and pieces of memory and her rich imagination. Often humorously, and always genuinely, Silko shares impressions of her inner world with us, offering up her deep relation to and loving observations of the natural and spiritual world in which she lives.

*Elizabeth McNeil*

Arizona State University

**We Are Our Language: An Ethnography of Language Revitalization in a Northern Athabaskan Community.** By Barbra A. Meek. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2010. 232 pages. \$29.95 paper.

The difficulties that accompany indigenous language revitalization are often not readily apparent until one has spent time researching and working in the field, as Barbra Meek has done with the Kaska language. *We Are Our Language: An Ethnography of Language Revitalization in a Northern Athabaskan Community* examines the difficulties and rewards of working in the field of Native language revitalization. Providing an in-depth study of the theoretical and practical questions involved, *We Are Our Language* revolves around the connections and disconnections between theory and methodology as language revitalization programs are actually applied in indigenous communities and classrooms. In bridging theory and application the difficulties of language revitalization become salient, and Meek does an excellent job contextualizing this phenomenon.

Meek positions herself early on: we learn that she spent time visiting and living with Kaska families in the Yukon over the course of a decade, and volunteered and worked with school and community language programs. Meek’s American Indian identity, university training in language revitalization, and