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## HISTORY AND MEMORY IN *ALMANAC OF THE DEAD* AND *ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF SOLITUDE*

J.D. Isip

Remote times have a great attraction—sometimes mysteriously so—for the imagination.

Sigmund Freud, from *Moses and Monotheism*

Plantation workers are gunned down mercilessly by the army; years later, no one can remember how many workers were killed, or if the event even took place. For generations, an Indian tribe worships small, stone idols, calling them “the little grandparents”; years later, the “gods” are on display in an Arizona museum—among pottery and masks (*Almanac of the Dead* 32). History and memory, in Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead*, exist in a state of flux; they assign purpose and meaning to some lives while, simultaneously, draining the same from other lives.

The past is at once curse and blessing, and the future is both certain and uncertain. It seems that both García Márquez and Silko, in their novels, suggest that neither history nor memories provide an absolute or reliable truth about the past and the future, but are, instead, constructions of the individual—constructions used to benefit and, in many cases, sustain. I will show how the characters in these novels manipulate history and memory to serve their own purposes and, finally, I will attempt to make a connection to what García Márquez and Silko, through their novels, wish for their audience to learn about the nature of history and memory—specifically, that García Márquez and Silko caution a total trust in either because both are subjective constructions.

## Melquiades and Yoeme

García Márquez and Silko use almost all of their characters to show how easily history and memory may be altered; even the characters who seem to exist outside of self-serving motivations manipulate history and memory in ways that ultimately do more harm than good. The gypsy, Melquiades, is the memory of Macondo in *One Hundred Years*, and the boisterous old Yaqui, Yoeme, is one of the memories in *Almanac* (along with Seese and Sterling). According to Melquiades and Yoeme, there are no mistakes in history—everything happens for a reason and every event, no matter how terrible, was “meant to be.” Both novels feature indecipherable texts which are supposed to “explain” what every event is leading up to—the texts are lost memories. For the characters in *Almanac*, that text is Yoeme’s collection of notebooks, the almanac; for the people of Macondo, that text is a collection of papers left by Melquiades. At the beginning of *One Hundred Years*, Melquiades tries to explain to the Buendía patriarch, José Arcadio Buendía, that the magnets which the gypsy has showed him will not work to find “gold” in the earth; the scene is a hauntingly accurate picture of the later generations of Buendías continually “looking for gold” with the wrong tools, including Melquiades’ own manuscripts, which only provide a prophecy of their extinction (HY 1-2). Michael Wood explains this text as the memory of Macondo:

[...] A hundred years is the scope and term of Melquiades’ manuscripts, a prophecy designed to serve as a past, a kind of occluded and externalized memory, everything the family ought to remember but won’t (Wood 74).

Melquiades is, indeed, the living memory of the people of the people of Macondo, and García Márquez makes sure that this metaphor is not lost on the reader. When the town falls under a “memory sickness,” José Arcadio, once again, attempts to use the wrong tool for the job—and it is Melquiades who must restore the memory of the town (HY 48-49). The machine José Arcadio is working on is only a substitute for the real thing, the *real* memory, Melquiades:

The memory machine gets only the most fleeting allowance of narrative time because [...] it is suddenly rendered redundant by the arrival of [...] Melquiades. [...] Hence the neat splicing of subject matter whereby work on the memory machine is so smoothly replaced by Melquiades suggests that he, rather than José Arcadio’s intended construction, is truly the memory machine (M. Bell 130).

García Márquez, in this scene, seems to make a distinction between true and false memories. José Arcadio is attempting to restore memories by ways of “constructing”—which seems to reflect how history is defined for most of the Buendías, who take opportunity

after opportunity to “construct” history; Úrsula, Pilar and Remedios all construct the intricate web of lies about lineage which leads to the birth of the child with the pig’s tail (*HY* 416). It is Melquiades (who has no infidelity to hide, no messy tie to the bloodline) who restores the memory of Macondo.

Yet, for all of his restorative powers, Melquiades is careful throughout the novel only to reveal *so much* in an attempt to save the people of Macondo from themselves—as he so often does—quite literally—with their patriarch, José Arcadio. Melquiades’ acts as not only memory, but a filtered memory—a memory, not unlike the memory of those who have experienced trauma, a memory that is selective for the good of the people:

Melquiades has magically concentrated his century of events into an instant as *protection*, a means of keeping knowledge from his characters and saving them from knowledge (Woods 50).

History, for the people of Macondo, ultimately spells out their own destruction. Melquiades does his best to slow this realization down by filtering the memory of the town and keeping the whole truth hidden until the final chapter when no action will be able to change the course of events, and everything, painfully, makes sense (*HY* 416-17). Through Melquiades, in contrast to the Buendías, it seems that García Márquez is suggesting that Melquiades’ construction of history is at least more useful (if not more *truthful*) because he is an objective outsider.

In *Almanac*, Silko seems to suggest the opposite—that the better construction of history is the history told by “the people,” the history told from their memory:

The stories of the people or their “history” had always been sacred, the source of their entire existence. If the people had not retold the stories, or if the stories had somehow been lost, then the people were lost [...] within “history” reside relentless forces, powerful spirits, vengeful, relentlessly seeking justice (*AD* 315-316).

Where Melquiades provides memory through a protective filter, Yoeme, in *Almanac*, provides memory through a war-like filter, setting up an “us against them” mentality. Yoeme interprets all of history as leading to a destruction of the *other*, the European. Her “memory” is skewed, and even the events which paint natives in an unfavorable light, are explained away as having a connection with the evil Europeans:

Yoeme alleges that Montezuma and the Aztecs were equal to Cortés and the Europeans in ‘blood worship’: ‘Those who worshiped destruction and blood secretly knew one another (Jarman 159).

However, Yoeme is not free from influence like Melquiades seems to be; Yoeme is not outside or objective. Sara Spurgeon suggests that Yoeme's lust for revenge and redemption, which paints the "memory" of Lecha, especially Zeta, and the others, is really only a version of a European mythology (*AD* 131):

Even those native characters who retain some knowledge of what Indian cultures were like before the arrival of Europeans view the struggle in which they are engaged through the lens of the Anglo myth of the savage war, with the whites playing the part of the barbaric Others who must be eliminated at all costs (Spurgeon 107).

To Yoeme, "the white man had violated Mother Earth," and the memory of this violation would encourage her people to rise up in an inevitable dethroning of the *other* (*AD* 121). Lecha tells Zeta that Yoeme's old notebooks, "don't just tell you when to plant or harvest, they tell you about the days yet to come—drought or flood, plague, civil war or invasion" (*AD* 137). Yoeme's "memory," just like Melquiades', is planted in both the past and the future. Just like Melquiades, Yoeme foretells a future of destruction, but the destruction is of the *other*, of the Europeans, "You may as well die fighting the white man" (*AD* 580).

Melquiades seems to exist in *One Hundred Years* as a focal point, someone to keep an eye on when the lies and contradictions force a reader to go back to the family tree provided in the front of the text (of newer versions of the novel). Melquiades provides objective grounding and *truer* memory, but, perhaps because he is objective, he also seems to lack the desire to attempt to alter history. Yoeme, on the other hand, understands history as inevitable, the same as Melquiades, but she still attempts to play an active role in her history; she may be flawed and biased, but she uses her constructed memories to inspire Lecha and Zeta—she gives them purpose by creating a history where they each play a pivotal role.

Through Melquiades, García Márquez seems to suggest that the better "history" comes from the memory of an objective observer; Silko, through Yoeme, seems to suggest that the only worthwhile history is the one that comes from the (biased) memory of "the people." Both, however, seem to agree that "history" is only a version derived from any number of memories, a construction.

### Úrsula and Seese... and Silko

Though García Márquez and Silko both reveal history and memory to be fallible, neither of them deny the usefulness of constructions of history and memory that build self-worth and strength for individual

characters. Úrsula and Seese both seem haunted by their memories and, as a result, their histories are colored by an anxiety and/or fear of the past; yet, each of them take surprising and courageous turns, in spite of their haunted memories. Úrsula's memories materialize in two seemingly comic instances towards the beginning of *One Hundred Years*. She does not want to have sex with José Arcadio because she remembers (or thinks she remembers) the son of her aunt and José Arcadio's uncle who was born with a pig's tail (*HY* 20). She also creates a history around "that pirate" Sir Francis Drake that, again, has comic overtones: "Therefore, every time Úrsula became exercised over her husband's mad ideas, she would leap back over three hundred years of fate and curse the day that Sir Francis Drake had attacked Riohacha" (*HY* 20). It feels right to laugh her off at first, but it becomes apparent throughout the novel that she, more than any of the other characters, is the soul and lifeblood of Macondo—which seems to be consistent with García Márquez's women in his novels:

García Márquez has often stated his belief that women symbolize stability and judiciousness, while men tend to be more given to adventure and extravagance. The following quotation from García Márquez shows, in his own words, what he calls 'the historical view which I have of the two sexes': 'Women uphold the order of the species with an iron fist, while men go through life dedicated to all of the infinite folly which drives history (Deveney, Jr. 38).

It is Úrsula who quickly begins to rewrite the history of Macondo the village into Macondo the boomtown: she single-handedly grows the population by finding a route José Arcadio had failed to find (*HY* 35-6), she creates the successful pastry and candy animal business (53), and she takes down the would-be dictator, Arcadio, with a lash (105).

Of course, no matter how much history Úrsula creates, she cannot seem to avoid the sadness over having set into motion the destruction of Macondo by marrying José Arcadio. One scene, in particular, illustrates both her growing strength and the inevitability of the history she has set into motion. She goes to visit her son, Colonel Aureliano Buendía, before he is executed:

Facing the impossibility of finding anyone to intervene, convinced that her son would be shot at dawn, Úrsula wrapped up the things she wanted to bring him and went to the jail alone (123).

García Márquez uses a line often repeated by Úrsula to show the futility of her efforts in the face of history when the Colonel tells her how surprised he was at how the town had aged:

"What did you expect?" Úrsula sighed. "Time passes."  
"That's how it goes," Aureliano admitted, "but not so much" (124).

Both characters speak as two who are resigned to “let things be” but all of the action leading to this scene shows them as forces attempting to change history; both cannot control history, but, in a last attempt to provide his mother strength and comfort, Aureliano suggests a way to control her memory of that moment: “Don’t beg or bow down to anyone. *Pretend* that they shot me a long time ago” (125, emphasis mine). What Aureliano suggests happens to be what Úrsula had been doing all along—pretending that the destruction of her family and Macondo was not, as she knew from the start, imminent.

Seese also seems to “pretend” for much of her introduction in *Almanac*, and, like Úrsula, she starts off as laughable and contemptuously so—to the point that we see her the same way the maid, Elena, sees her—she is “trash” (AD 46). She convinces herself that David loves her and will take care of her and Monte. She follows up one fantasy after another, replacing David with Eric. She is a drunk and a drug addict who has lost her child—but it is the way that she clings to the memory of her child, the way that she refuses to close the book on his history that begins to redeem her. Janet St. Clair points out that

Although Seese’s child is both conceived and kidnapped while Seese is in her usual cocaine-and-alcohol fog, she is the best mother in the novel: she at least feels keenly the loss of her baby (149).

Seese finds the strength to get free of Beaufrey and successfully finds Lecha, whom she believes will be able to find her missing son, Monte. All the while, she remembers her missing child, and the memory fuels her to attempt to rewrite her sad history (AD 110). In one scene, she literally rewrites history: she is typing up Lecha’s notebooks and, rather than opening her long-hidden stash of cocaine, she uses her memory of Monte to add lines to the almanac (595). In the moment she overcomes her addiction and adds her son to an ancient record, thus figuratively and literally changing history. Virginia Bell states that

In her capacity as Lecha’s secretary, Seese uses Lecha’s counter-chronicle to mourn her lost child and thereby keep herself from using more cocaine. When Lecha gives her handwritten notes to enter in the word processor, Seese enters her own recollection of a dream about her son instead [...]. By transforming her data entry into poetic remembering, Seese transforms the almanac from a multi-tribal Indian historiographic compilation into a lyrical recording of her own grief and loss (25-26).

In regards to the larger themes of history and the interpretation of history through memory, this “recording of grief and loss” seems to go right to the heart of both *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Almanac of the Dead*. The history of the fictional town of Macondo is strikingly similar to the early history of García Márquez’s home

country, Colombia; Seese's lost child has an even closer tie to Silko, as Sandra Baringer points out:

Silko lost custody of her youngest child in a contested divorce trial just prior to embarking on the writing of *Almanac of the Dead*. This circumstance resonates with the disruption of maternal relations that informs the entire novel (115).

If Silko, like her character, Seese, "records her grief" in the *Almanac*, then, like Seese, she uses her memory to rewrite history. While pointing out the unreliability of history and memory, both García Márquez and Silko may also be constructing history and memory, like Úrsula and Seese, as a healing agent (even if they all understand that it is a placebo).

### Macondo and Laguna

Though García Márquez and Silko both acknowledge the usefulness of "history" and "memory," both authors seem to suggest that history and memory are only useful to those who understand the unreliability of the terms "history" and "memory" (which, as you may have noticed, are interchangeable as both are mere constructions). History and memory can and will be used as weapons, and the only choice for every character is to be either the victim or the one wielding the weapon. García Márquez takes a real-life event (the UFC strike of 1928) and fleshes it out as a clear parable for the results of apathy, capitalism, and unionization and a collective loss of memory:

In [Chapter 15]—you will recall—we hear about how three thousand banana plantation workers on strike are gunned down by the army, an event which is modeled on a real event, the massacre of banana plantation workers which occurred at 1:30 am on 6 December 1928 in Ciénaga, Colombia, on the orders of General Carlos Cortés Vargas. In real life, as García Márquez found out to his amazement, 10 years after the actual event, when he visited the scene, nobody could remember exactly what happened (Hart 117).

John Krapp says that the trouble, in *One Hundred Years*, really begins prior to the arrival of the Banana Company (i.e. the UFC):

In the case of their reaction to the Civil Wars and the Conservative occupation of the village, the remaining Macondones' volitional apathy causes them to be represented by others in a manner increasingly at odds with their best interests (415).

The Banana Company massacre starts as what García Márquez writes as a "kind of hallucination" and what "seemed like a farce" (HY 305). The ways García Márquez describes the incident, here, seem to suggest the unreliability of even our own memories; he



shows José Arcadio Segundo questioning the reliability of the moment as it happens. José Arcadio Segundo's trauma is intensified when he seems to be the only person with a memory of the event and the official word of the incident basically describes it as a figment of his imagination:

What makes the [train station massacre of the workers by the Banana Company soldiers] so significant in a discussion of apathy and identity is the absolute certainty with which the Macondones who had no involvement with the Banana Company come to accept the official version of what happened at the station: 'there were no dead, the satisfied workers had gone back to their families, and the banana company was suspending all activity until the rains stopped' (Krapp 417).

What is truly bizarre and suggests that neither memory *nor* history is sufficiently reliable is the fact that García Márquez's parable has created yet another distortion of history. José Arcadio Segundo sees three thousand people die at the train station in *One Hundred Years* (HY 308). Readers find out that the event is based on the 1928 UFC incident. Now, simply by writing a parable, García Márquez has completely changed the memory of the actual event; according to Eduardo Posada-Carbo, many people believe that "three thousand people" died at the UFC incident and

History became legend. García Márquez reveals to us now that the apocalyptic massacre described in his book did not occur in such dramatic dimensions; but now 'the legend has been adopted as history' (396).

Like the Banana Company incident, the entire plot of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* seems to allude to a national memory that is more hallucination than reality and a history that is almost certainly a farce. García Márquez manipulates history to make us question whether or not we are being manipulated by our own history, and he plays with memory to suggest that our own memories might be playing with us. Essentially, García Márquez is asking the reader whether the reader is in control of history and memory, or if he is simply the victim of someone else's version of history and memory.

Silko, in *Almanac of the Dead*, also seems to focus on an ultimate question of whose version of history and memory do we finally believe. We are introduced to Sterling in the first chapter of the novel and throughout the novel he acts as no more than a distraction and almost always a victim of his circumstances (AD 22). His storyline, though appealing (since he seems to be the only truly "good" character in the novel), is not integral to the plot (or, rather, plots). Of course, just like the Native Americans, Sterling has been banished from his home, but, in the end, he is allowed to return. His return is a significant allegory

for the return of the tribes predicted in the almanac

Sterling's return to the Laguna reservation can be viewed as marking his spiritual and cultural 'arrival,' that is, as a moment that 'ends' his forced migration (Muthyala 379).

Silko, through Sterling, suggests an ability to regain memory and, by doing so, rewrite the present—rewrite the history of the future. Sterling's entire adventure revolves around his running away from the memory of his past. He wants to forget the movie crew and the Stone Snake and lose himself in other people's histories—first the adventures of "historical" heroes/outlaws like Jesse James, Geronimo, and Dillinger (*AD* 40-41), and then in Seese's stories. He wants to forget and move forward as he has read is the process:

In his hopeless perusal of pop psychology magazines, Sterling reads that doctors advise depressed people to put their past behind them, to forget what is dead and gone and focus only on the present (Spurgeon 119).

But Silko insists that only by remembering, only by returning will he be able to truly move on, and so he does. Sterling closes out *Almanac of the Dead* by canceling his magazine subscriptions and anticipating the future foretold by the stone snake. He gains control of memory and history and is finally able to use them rather than be a victim of them.

It seems that, ultimately, the point of each novel is not simply that history and memory are mere constructions, but that those who do not understand the nature of history and memory are destined to be victims of someone who *does*. In addition, our constructions of history and memory, when we understand them, have the power to benefit and sustain us. Yoeme tells Lecha the story of the four children traveling with the almanac, their constructed history, "You see, it had been the almanac that had saved them" (*AD* 252)—and, it seems, both books are aimed at *saving* people (i.e. Columbians, Native Americans, the authors themselves, any other reader) through two more constructions of history/memory.

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