Seese and Zeze the X--
Two Women Against the Destroyers

A Comparison of *Almanac of the Dead*
by Leslie Marmon Silko and *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros

Thomas Matchie
NDSU
Fargo, ND
Sometimes books stand out by contrast, or come together because they are so different—especially when they have a common subject, like the oppressive power of a culture. This is the case with two seemingly desperate works set in Hispanic worlds. One is Sandra Cisneros' tiny novella *The House on Mango Street* (1989) about a young girl growing up in a chicano neighborhood in Chicago. As in much of chicana literature, she remembers her past as a key to the future (Rocard 152). The other is a huge, 750-page novel bearing the ominous title *Almanac of the Dead* (1991), written by Leslie Silko, whose ancestry is Hispanic—"Laguna, Mexican and white" (Peyersted 15). Here, instead of a single voice, the omniscient author brings together various groups as they migrate to Tucson, Arizona, where Europeanization, which includes but is not limited to the Hispanic southwest, is in the process of destroying the lives of countless Native, white, African, Asian, and Mexican Americans. Taken together, the vastly different ways in which these two authors depict people struggling with oppression, helps not only to explain both novels, but appreciate more the meaning of the mysterious power of evil as it is tied to culture, and the difficulty for individuals to attain or maintain the dignity and freedom which are suppose to be synonymous with the word "America."

For purposes of comparison I want to focus upon a single character in each work. One is the narrator of *Mango Street*, Esperanza, which means, "hope," though this thirteen-year-old imaginatively baptizes herself "Zeze the X" (11), suggesting something undeveloped in herself. Wide-eyed and innocent, she is
a poet who uses language to forge her identity in an oppressive setting, one that includes a wide variety of characters. But Zeze's final state is a positive one--something which Gonzales-Berry calls "an archtypal labyrinth" (114) from which others might profit. In Almanac, there is a woman named Seese, much older and worldly wise than Esperanza. A former prostitute and off-and-on drug addict, Seese lacks Esperanza's naiveté regarding the cruelty of men, but she is still a compassionate person, and like Esperanza rooted in hope despite the brutal forces she encounters. Some critics find "no descent or likable characters in the novel (PW 94), but this is to miss the role of Seese--whose very name implies insight. Almanac, larger in scope than Mango Street, has four or five plots involving, not just a variety, but a whole menagerie of people. Still, like Zeze the X, Seese is on a quest that leads her to transcribe some Spanish notebooks, the Almanac of the Dead, which connects all the characters and plots. Silko herself tells of her dreams about these Mayan fragments preserved by caretakers and which connect years of exploitation. (Cotelli 152). Though no poet, Seese's skill with language leads her into a prophetic world with implications that are universal. Through the lives of these two, Zeze and Seese, the reader travels two different literary roads to ponder a similar quandary--what to do with the Destroyers (Silko's term)² that permeate the culture, or cultures, in which we live.

Structurally, then, Mango Street is a bildungsroman,³ a novel of growth--a young girl becomes a woman in a patriarchal culture, but as McCracken points out, it is "oriented outwardly, away from
the bourgeois individualism" (64) of so many standard texts. Here
the first person point of view is appropriate, for Esperanza is
virtually a Huck Finn (a hundred years later) who struggles to
escape the shibboleths of her people, in this case a chicano
family and neighborhood. There is a different twist, however, for
she loves her father, but he is part of a structure wherein males
suppress females. Esperanza’s grandmother was wild until her
great-greatfather “threw a sack over her head and carried her off”
(11). Moreover, her mother is “a smart cookie,” but “doesn’t know
which subway train to take to get downtown” (90), and this weighs
upon the little girl. So she goes into the neighborhood, her
river of life, to meet head on the problems of her culture, and in
110 pages we witness about four years of her life. Cisneros has a
gift for “recreating the rhythsmmic voices of children, teens and
young women” (Chavaz 64), Here Esperanza uses poetic language--she
is “a balloon tied to an anchor” (9)--that is consistent with her
childlike but highly perceptive view of reality.

Almanac, by contrast, is an adult novel, with a far larger
scope than one neighborhood. Divided into six sections, it
includes all of North America, from New Jersey to San Diego, from
Alaska to Mexico City, as well as the Islands of Haiti and Cuba.
But everything culminates in one city--Tucson, Arizona, where
Seese goes for employment. As in other works, like Ceremony,
Silko uses the southwest, but this time more the city than the
mountains, and she goes back in time, not just in one person’s
memory, but through the notebooks which Seese translates to the
Mayan and Aztec Civilizations. But more than this the “feminine
landscape" which comes through the character of Te'sh (Gunn Allen) in her earlier novel is replaced by the hard masculine rhetoric of Tucson, "city of thieves." Indeed, Almanac is no bildungsroman or prose poem, but a devastatingly large view of space and time, incorporating many literary forms and some strikingly crass language. Still, the author works through realistic individuals, like Seese and the hired man, Sterling, an Indian from northern Arizona whom she meets at the ranch home of Lecha and Zeta, twin sisters and heirs of the almanac. It is a different kind of place, however, for as Skow points out, it is a center of cocaine trade and highly fortified with guns (86). It is here that Seese, like Esperanza, learns about the past and observes the lives of many others as a key to her own. She listens to Sterling's story, for instance, and then reflects on her past, having come from San Diego in hopes the psychic Lecha will help her find her lost child, Monte, and perhaps build a new and better life.

An underlying theme of both novels is the notion of land or property. In Almanac, that concern takes the form of the exploitation of land. One of the main plots centers on the Italian mafia, the Blues--Max, Leah and their extended family, who come to Tucson from New Jersey to buy and sell land for profit. Leah is a real estate dealer who manipulates a federal judge that she might sink underground wells to make her property more valuable. To attain its ends, this group enters all kinds of underworld operations--political bribery, sexual liaisons, and violent threats, which for Silko represent the worst forces in the westernization of America. Jones says that this Tucson is "the
vivid sump toward which all these rough beasts slink" (84). But others have different ideas about property. Bartclomeo is a Cuban Marxist who advocates violent socialization of the land, while Clinton, a Haitian nationalist, thinks a study of black history will redeem that country for black Indians. As a counterplot there is Lecha, dying of cancer, but operating out of Tucson with her sister Zeta and in conjunction with their Mexican Indian grandmother, Yoeme, to find and transcribe some ancient manuscripts (the Almanac) which contain prophecies about the exploitation of land on this continent. It is to this "house" (22) with all its "secrets" that Seese comes, quickly developing a bond with the gardener, Sterling, hired by Lecha's son Ferro. Sterling tells her of his banishment from the reservation because he allowed a Hollywood crew to film some snakes or "stone idols" (31) sacred to the Pueblos. Strangely enough, references to similar snakes turn up in the manuscripts, as they do in other plots, tying his story to the larger global scene which Seese, through her special skills, gradually uncovers.

Curiously, Mango Street is also about land. In contrast to Almanac, however, this house is not just real estate, but symbolic of a chicano world which restricts, inhibits, degrades--particularly, but not exclusively, women--through male tactics such as historical priority, patriarchal customs, and shere physical strength. Gradually, Esperanza discovers and then writes about these things. Geraldo, for instance, is a wetback excluded from this culture because he cannot find a home. McCracken observes that one of the motivating roots of the novel is the
inadequate housing conditions in which Cisneros and others in her community lived (65). Living in "two-room flats and sleeping rooms he rented," Geraldo sends money home until one night he is hospitalized by a hit and run driver and then is "never heard from again" (66). But people are also trapped inside the house, as with Mamacita, a big mama across the street who "no speak English" and has to remain home because she "does not belong" (77-8), but ironically has to listen to her baby sing Pepsi commercials that come over the TV. So Esperanza looks at house, land, or property, not as something to possess, but to purify. Unlike most of the characters in Almanac, (but rather like Seese) she is "streetwise but sensitive" (Milligan 24)--acutely aware of the tragic nature of trying to relate to an oppressive place. And she is naively attracted, as is Seese, to a house which will become the basis of her power and her growth.

Ideally one associates property, having a house, with togetherness, community. Esperanza dreams of such a place. She values the "imagination" (49) and likes to "dream" (61) of its possibilities for unity. Unlike her girlfriend, Sally, who "dreams and dreams," Zeze the X is no romantic, but fills in her X by actually building community everyday. As a little girl she uses her money to buy a share in a bike so she can take rides with the neighbor kids Lucy and Rachel. And realizing that people like Geraldo are cut out of the community, Esperanza plans to build a house with, not rats, but "Bums in the Attic" (86) so that everyone can have a home. But Zeze is also aware of forces within families that destroy solidarity, what Cisneros calls "the ghosts
that haunt me" and which she "had to write about" ("Notebook" 73). The Earl, for instance, is a southern jukebox salesman who won't let his wife outside, holding her "tight by the crook of the arm" (71). So with the Sire and his woman; in fact, Esperanza has bad dreams of being held "so hard" (73). For her the male need to control destroys sensitive bonds between men and women, as it does between parents and children. Alicia, young and smart, goes to the university to transcend her mother's "rolling pin and sleepiness" (31), but when her father makes fun of her she begins to imagine mice, fearing "four-legged fur. And fathers" (32). But then Esperanza goes to a palm reader, Elenita, who tells her there is a "house made of heart" (64) in her future. Zeze puts her faith, her dreams, in that kind of communal world, though she is acutely aware of the forces that work against it.

In Almanac Seese dreams more about the past than the future, and it is a past that contains more isolation than community. After listening to Sterling's history, she recalls her life in San Diego where she lived with three homosexuals--David, Beaufrey, and Eric. Here, after an abortion, Seese had a child by David, who then left with the baby. Beaufrey, jealous of Seese, bought her off with cocaine to get rid of her. Then Eric, her trusted friend, committed suicide. Racked with grief, Seese then comes to Tucson to work with the psychic Lecha--her Elenita--hoping that she will help her find Monte, now thirteen years old. It is interesting that Silko parallels this kind of dream with another in the novel involving broken relationships. Mercado, a Mexican insurance man become arms dealer, after building a house for his
wife, Iliana, cultivates an adulterous relationship with Algeria, the architect who designed the house. Then, after Iliana's death, and having become estranged from Alegria, he begins to dream of snakes, while his wife develops sexual liaisons with the communist Bartholomeo as well as Max Blue's Sonny; in this way Silko is able to combine several of the plots. Mercado's final gesture is to start wearing a bulletproof vest, though his greatest threat is more internal than external. If, as St. John notes, the novel modulates from "comic book fare" and "magic realism" to "memorable vignettes" (124), Mercado's story is one of the latter. But back to Seese, like Zeze she is only too aware of the kind of forces that break up families, be they homosexual or heterosexual. Yet she remains a promoter of unity, including her search for her child of her dreams, or simply laughing and talking with another outcast, Sterling, in the new house she has found in Tucson.

One cannot read about families in either of these novels without seeing how sexuality itself, when misused, leads to oppression and the consequent destruction of community. In Chicana literature, says Herrera, the combination of sexism and racism "surfaces again and again (3) Esperanza, of course, is young and just coming to consciousness of what it means to be a chicana woman. In a chapter entitled "Hips," she says "you gotta be able to know what to do with hips" (50), and then chides her little sister Nenny that she just "doesn't get it" (52). But gradually Zeze comes to see how sexual attitudes affect men and women negatively. Her friend Marin thinks sex is for "boys to see us" and so her "skirts are shorter" (27)--something Esperanza sees as
a trap, for she knows what happens to women later on. Not only
does The Earl hold his wife tightly by the arm, but Rafaela's
husband won't let her outside because she is "too beautiful" (79).
Esperanza herself feels the sting of sexual blindness in the
monkey garden (an old used car lot) when she tries to defend her
friend Sally with a brick when some boys try to force her to kiss
them. Sally, more interested in the boys, rebukes Zeze, whereupon
everything inside her "hiccupped" (97). For Esperanza, sex does
something to people, and both sexes seem to be involved in the
conspiracy.

In Almanac, Seese is a product of that larger sexual
conspiracy. Not knowing that David has stolen her baby to use in
a "torture video" (Skow), she leaves Beaufrey in San Diego for the
Stage Coach outside Tucson where she used to work a prostitute for
Tiny. She hopes her friend Cherie, still working though married
with five kids, will help her locate Lecha. At the bar she sees
"the men reaching up on the platform with both hands grabbing for
her (Cherie's) crotch and her breasts" (68) The language and
sexually charged environment here seems far removed Mango Street,
but the exploitation is similar. Moreover, Seese like Zeze
respects people; a friend of Tiny and Cherie, she once saved
Cherie, first by hiding her cocaine during a narcotics bust and
then by shielding her from Tiny's wrath. Casual sex, of course,
colors the whole of Almanac. Seese soon discovers that Lecha has
slept with Root, a maimed bicycle rider who works as a front
smuggling drugs with Mosca and Calabazas. Once Bamboozled by twin
sisters, Calabazas has had an affair with Zeta, who also helps to
smuggle drugs across the border. Ferro, Lecha's son, has homosexual relations with Paulie, and later with Seese's David himself. All this is part of the westernization in which most everybody seems to be caught—capitalists like the Blues and Mercado, the communist Bartolomeo, and even the militant champion of Indian land, Angelita La Escapia, who sleeps with such philosophical extremes as Bartolomeo and El Feo, the Mayan Indian who with his brother Tacho, Mercado's chauffeur, later leads an army of homeless Chiapan Indians toward Tucson to crush the spirit of Europeanization. Seese is the victim of these larger forces, but like Zeze she is still other-centered; having once saved Cherie, she is about to become Lecha's nurse.

What is also evident is the violence which follows these sexual relations. Seese, of course, had befriended Eric, who then committed suicide when David left with the baby. David eventually comes to Tucson he takes up with Ferro, but then betrays him for Jamey, an undercover cop who is consequently killed. Ultimately, David himself dies falling from his horse on the ranch. Meanwhile, Mercado, after all his escapades, is shot to death by Tacho--also called "Wacah" (339) because of he communicates with birds--testing his boss's bulletproof vest. Bartolomeo, after leaving Alegria, Mercado's wife, toys with the Mayan Angelita, who then kills him for his Marxist views. Zeta eventually splits with Calabazas and then shoots Greenlee, another arms dealer she hates. Trigg, a biomaterials salesman, who has sex with Leah Blue, ends up getting his head smashed in; and even Max, who oversees an extended family immersed in gross sexuality--Marilyn, his nephew
Bingo's wife, is a specialist in oral sex--is crippled in a helicopter crash before being struck dead by lightening on the gold course where he does his business. Seese, of course, witnesses only the violence connected with Lecha's house, but in another sense the notebooks tell it all--predicting the violence as part of a fourth world of pueblo myth. Tallent says the "the entire culture reeks of cruelty and death," so that the "individual imagination confronts, not specific loss, but fathomless brutality" (6). Strangely enough, the violence occurs mainly to the men, as if there were a male posture to westernization. Seese, in need of money finally goes back to Tiny, who has always liked her, to sell a kilo of cocaine in order to survive, when suddenly there is a drug raid and Tiny (really a fat pimp) is himself shot to death and Seese walks away (699).

There are no violent deaths in Mango Street, though Zeze slowly comes to see the effects of personal violence, especially on women. Perhaps because she is young, the brutality which she records in poetic ways affects her more deeply. She discovers, for instance, that Sally's father "forgot he was her father between the buckle and the belt" (93). Then, on her first job, when a man grabs her "so hard on the mouth and doesn't let go" (55) Esperanza personalizes the meaning of physical violence. This kind of awareness deepens when Minerva, who lets Zeze read her poems, comes over "black and blue" from her husband's leaving after she has let him in again. All this weighs upon Esperanza who feels there is "nothing I can do" (85). Such violence culminates among the Red Clowns at the circus where Sally lies to
her friend and Esperanza is (apparently) raped. Sensing his "dirty fingernails" against her skin, she says the "Sky tipped" as the boy cynically muses, "I love you Spanish girl" (100). Esperanza's sensitivity to the dehumanization from sexual violence contrasts with the seeming indifference to sex or violence among the characters in Almanac. Both Seese and Zeze are victims of such abuse, and both seek to restore links to humanity, one as a child in a patriarchal culture, the other as an adult abused and manipulated by males. The one exception is Sterling in whom Seese finds a companion she can talk to about what it all means.

Beneath all the cruelty in both novels is a quest. In Mango Street Esperanza, while observing what happens to chicano men and women, seeks something different for herself—something to fill in the X. Zeze knows her mother is trapped, as are other mothers, like Rosa Vergas who cannot control her many children and on whom they eventually "spit" (30). So are daughters, like Alicia, who can't get beyond her mother's rolling pin, or Sally who is beaten by her father, and therefore marries to escape his influence, but ends up even more restricted and unhappy. Then, insisting on short skirts to please the boys, there are the teens, the precursors of wives tightly controlled by possessive husbands. So Zeze decides "not to grow up tame" (88). She endeavors to be herself--"dance with ordinary shoes" (47) and yet welcome other people, even bums, into her house without fear of violence. It's interesting that Esperanza recognizes some of her own blindness, as when the children play a game imitating Aunt Lupe, suffering from a disease. She feels guilty because she knows Lupe listened
to her poetry, even when she wanted to "jump out my skin" (60--something she eventually does. It is Lupe who encourages her to "keep writing," because "It will keep you free" (61), she says. After Lupe dies Esperanza really begins to "dream dreams"--dreams of a house different from that on Mango Street. And her writing, her poetry, becomes not only the road to, but a substantial part of that reality.

Seese in Almanac is also on a quest--to find her child. Though she is a victim of society, the forces rooted in greed, pleasure, and power, she looks out for others, be it Cherie, or Eric, or Lecha. And she relates to Sterling as a kind of other-self, identifying with him as a kind of rebel who likes to tell stories about Geronimoe and John Dillinger--individuals who fought political-economic systems. But she is also a linguist of sorts, and through her transcription work with Lecha she encounters another kind of quest for freedom--the fulfilment of a prophecy from the time of the snakeo, Quetzacoatl, that native lands would be restored and "humanity recreated" (576). In the notebooks the spirit snake's message is that that time is now at hand and "this world is about to end" (135). Details throughout the novel point to the importance of this symbol. Yoeme, source of the manuscripts, held the snake curled in her arms (131), and Mercado, indicative of the worst in the west, dreamt of the "giant silver rattlesnake" (340) before being shot himself by Tacho, his Indian servant. Through her association with Sterling and the stone idols, and by transcribing the manuscripts, Seese becomes part of the larger quest or movement, the application of the almanac to
history. For this Zeta does not want her around, thinking of her only as an instrument, but Seese is still there. Indeed, at the time of police raid when Tiny is killed, she "gets the picture" (698) of white witchery. Though always used by others, she becomes part of the cataclysmic change, while, (like Zeze) looking out for others amid the violence.

The ending of Almanac is apocalyptic and takes on a surrealistic tone. Birkert aptly calls it "Apocalypse Now"—in Tucson "drug busts, bombings, and murders all coincide with a freakish gathering of shamans, shams, and would-be revolutionists" (41) There is a general movement toward a holistic conference in this city where the participants speak of cataclysmic changes. A barefoot Hopi answers questions about the 5th world of Hopi mythology, and begins to gain converts like Calabazas' Mosca (732), who earlier had killed a British poet—symbolic of the English lies (romanticism in the form of capitalism) that had swept the continent. William Weasel Tail talks of the return of the buffalo and the midwestern plains to the Indians as he sings his modern "Ghost Dance" (738). Awa Gee, the eco-warrior makes plans to blow up the Glen Canyon Dam so as to return the southwest to its primitive state. And an army of homeless, led by the Mayan brothers, Feo and Tacho, move toward Tucson from the south, though Angelita La Escapia, "one tough she-dog" (739), disagrees with their non-violent ways. As all this is happening Lecha, Zeta and Seese leave Tucson for South Dakota and the secret headquarters of Wilson Weasel Tail where he hopes to ally his plains army with Mohawk forces from the North and East. Sterling goes with them,
only to get off in northern Arizona, where Seese "hugged Sterling one more time" (756). As Sterling, Seese's alter-ego, walks home he dreams of the giant snake and its message. Though he is not sure whether Tucson was all a dream he still feels the snake has returned and he is looking south "in the direction from which the twin brothers and the people would come" (763).

The final pages of *Mango Street* may also be apocalyptic, at least in a personal sense, for Esperanza's dreams have taken on an archetypal dimension that gives depth and breadth to what she sees imaginatively. Though some think Zeze's final state is escapist (Rodriguez), the opposite is true. Early in the novel, Zeze says that Mexicans "don't like their women strong" (10), but by the end that's just what's happened to her. And if the spirits give substance to *Almanac* (Tacho is called "Wacah," or spirit bird, because he interprets dreams), there a similar aspect to Esperanza's world. In Catholic chicana thinking, Lupe or Guadalupe suggests the Virgin of Guadalupe, a powerful spiritual force. It is Lupe who tells Zeze to keep writing; it will "make you free." Later Esperanza meets three comadres—her trinity—who advise her to come back to the house on Mango Street "For the ones who cannot out." So Esperanza's new strength is not just her own plan for freedom, but a mythical or literary house which she has built through her poetry and which now stands as a monument to freedom for all against the patriarchal chicana forces which oppress her people. It may be that his will never come to pass, anymore than the new ghost dance of which the notebooks speak, and which Seese has transcribed, will materialize as pictured in the
end of Almanac, but Zeze the X has filled in her X (the unknown of her being) in the end of the novel. Perhaps if Seese could appear on the past pages of Mango Street she would give her a "sterling" hug.

In the end both Mango Street and Almanac are about two victims of culturally oppressive worlds. The authors have chosen the worst in these worlds, though the two protagonists struggle for basic values rooted in love. One image in Mango Street is that of four skinny trees, whose "strength is their secret" (74). For Cisneros these trees, with "pointed necks and skinny elbows" are metaphorically Esperanza. They grow "despite concrete," and "they teach" (75). Through her writing this is what Zeze the X does. McCracken points out that Cisneros' own return to a Chicago barrio to teach creative writing is evidence that Esperanza's final state is no pipedream (71). It is interesting that in Almanac of the Dead there are six cottonwood trees which Yoeme says "talk to the mother water and tell her what human beings are doing" (117); so, long ago Yoeme butchered the trees. She then tells her grandchildren Lecha and Zeta that "that fucker Guzman" (116), her non-Indian husband, planted the trees, carried by Indian slaves, to shade the white men taking Indian land and mining its silver—the beginning of white exploitation in Mexico. Guzman then told Amelia, the girls' mother, that Yoeme would be dead to the family everafter. Now, however, Yoeme has passed the notebooks on to Lecha and Zeta, and this is what Seese has transcribed, and the holistic conference is all about.

The House on Mango Street is an archtypal house made from
trees by Zeze the X for "the ones who cannot out" (110). *Almanac of the Dead* is a testimony, whispered by cottonwood trees, preserved in some manuscripts, then illumined by Seese, about similar corruptive forces that stalk this continent and need cleansing. Some find Silko’s presentation of this message "unwieldy, unconvincing, and largely unappealing" (PW). Others see it is the work of a an angry woman, a "payback" to the white culture for all its atrocities (Jones). It is true that there is an exuberant ring to the end of *Mango Street* not found in the last pages of *Almanac*, perhaps because of Zeze’s triumphant imagery. But one must remember that the climax of Silko’s novel is also poetic, William Weasel Tail claiming “all that is left is the power of poetry” (714). And if there is a disturbing truth to this cataclysmic vision, it becomes is more palatable when seen from the perspective of, not the perpetrators of witchery, but victims like Seese and Sterling who only seek companionship and peace.

For those of us who come from the plains, where Seese is heading, the fragments that she (like Zeze) has brought to light, give new meaning to the old ballad: "O give me a home, where the buffalo roam, and the skys are not cloudy all day." That might be impossible, like Rachel-Seese looking for a lost, dead child, but it is an important thought nonetheless. Tallent is accurate when she says the novel is not only worth reading, but “passionate indictment, defiant augury, bravura storytelling.”
Works Cited


