

**KIOWA IMAGES, STORIES, AND HUMAN/
MORE-THAN-HUMAN RELATIONS IN
ALFRED AND N. SCOTT MOMADAY'S
THE WAY TO RAINY MOUNTAIN**

**THE WAY TO RAINY MOUNTAIN:
IMÁGENES, HISTORIAS Y RELACIONES
HUMANAS/MÁS-QUE-HUMANAS EN LA MEMORIA
KIOWA DE ALFRED Y N. SCOTT MOMADAY**

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Abstract

Drawing from the pictographic traditions and interspecies relations of the Kiowa as well as from N. Scott Momaday's own theories of language, vision, and the creative imagination, this article aims to broaden our understanding of the memoir *The Way to Rainy Mountain* as a verbal/visual collaboration between Kiowa painter Alfred Momaday and his son, N. Scott. The stories and images rendered in the book strongly establish the Kiowa in relation to a particular cultural landscape, to visual/oral forms of memory, and to the animals and more-than-human beings that endow them with meaning. To further understand these two sets of relations, the sacred interdependence between images/words and human/more-than-human beings in the Kiowa tradition, I first situate the revision of history, place, and ceremony carried out by the Momadays within a tribal-specific intellectual framework. To that end, I consider the visual modes and practices that were traditionally engaged by the Kiowa and which are reinserted by the Momadays in their text as a form of anti-colonial resurgence. Such strategies contributed to decolonizing textual spaces and tribal representation in the late 1960s through their blurring of Western disciplines and through the spiritual interconnection of human, more-than-humans and place at a time when Native American religions were banned. Words and images in *The Way to Rainy Mountain* are preeminently relational and place-based; they engage with the land and the multiple beings that

dwell on it at material and spiritual levels that cannot be set apart. Shaped by traditional Kiowa epistemology and social practice, *Rainy Mountain*'s illustrations depict more-than-human beings and interspecies relations which, understood as both material and sacred experience, lead to creative vision and cultural resurgence in this groundbreaking text.

Keywords: native American literature, N. Scott Momaday, Al Momaday, *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, Kiowa art, pictographic history, interspecies relations.

Resumen

Partiendo de las tradiciones pictográficas y de las relaciones entre especies asociadas a la cultura kiowa, así como de las teorías sobre el lenguaje, la visión y la imaginación creativa desarrolladas por N. Scott Momaday, en este trabajo propongo ampliar nuestra comprensión de la autobiografía colectiva *The Way to Rainy Mountain* entendida como colaboración visual y verbal entre el pintor kiowa Alfred Momaday y su hijo N. Scott. Las historias e imágenes plasmadas en esta obra contribuyeron a establecer a los kiowa en relación a un paisaje cultural concreto, a unas formas de memoria visual/oral, así como a los animales y seres más-que-humanos que les dan sentido. Para entender estos dos tipos de relación, la sagrada interdependencia entre las imágenes y las palabras y los seres humanos y más-que-humanos en la tradición kiowa, sitúo la revisión histórica, geográfica y ceremonial practicada por los Momaday en un marco intelectual tribal. Para ello considero los modos y prácticas visuales que caracterizan a la cultura kiowa y que son reinsertados por los Momaday en su obra como estrategia de resurgimiento anti-colonial. Estas estrategias contribuyeron a descolonizar los espacios textuales y la representación tribal a finales de los años 60 al cuestionar la rigidez de los campos de conocimiento occidentales e interconectar telúrica y espiritualmente a seres humanos y más-que-humanos en un momento histórico en el que las prácticas religiosas amerindias estaban prohibidas. Las palabras e imágenes plasmadas en *The Way to Rainy Mountain* son preeminentemente relacionales y están centradas en el territorio; apelan a la tierra y a los múltiples seres que la habitan de un modo material y espiritual que los hace inseparables. Las ilustraciones de *Rainy Mountain* muestran una clara influencia de la epistemología, historiografía visual y prácticas sociales kiowa y presentan relaciones entre especies que, entendidas como experiencia material y sagrada, llevan a la visión creativa y al resurgimiento cultural en esta obra pionera.

Palabras clave: literatura nativo americana, N. Scott Momaday, Al Momaday, *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, arte kiowa, historia pictográfica, relaciones entre especies.

Introduction

When in March 1968 Kiowa writer N. Scott Momaday decided to turn his collection of vignettes, *The Journey of Tai-Me* (1967), into a historical and family memoir entitled *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, he made the following request to the editors at the University of New Mexico Press: “Just a thought: What would you think of having my dad do the illustrations, making this an all-Kiowa (or at least two-Kiowa) project?” (in Lincoln 1986: 112). One year later Momaday was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for his first novel, *House Made of Dawn* (1968), while *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, featuring eleven illustrations sketched by his father, Kiowa painter Alfred Momaday, was published.¹ In the creation of this dialogical piece, Al Momaday did not merely contribute visual ideas as an illustrator but had a central role as a historical archivist and translator (from Kiowa to English), sharing with his son many of the tribal and family stories featured in *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (hereafter referred to as *Rainy Mountain*). Al Momaday interviewed Kiowa elders, selected and executed the illustrations, and acted as an intermediary between the older and the younger generation, unpacking the cultural and historical traditions of the Kiowa for his son and for the reader. In the documentary *Return to Rainy Mountain*, produced and directed by N. Scott Momaday’s daughter Jill, the Kiowa writer fully acknowledges this primordial creative influence: “My father was *my storyteller*. He had a considerable knowledge of Kiowa oral tradition. He used to tell me stories from the time I could first understand language. I made him tell them to me again and again and again *until I had them secured in my mind*” (Momaday 2017: min. 8, emphasis added).

As a painter, Al Momaday also became an early mediator between the visual and the verbal modes in his son’s literary works. Drawing from Kiowa storytelling and historical accounts that were image-based as well as from N. Scott Momaday’s own theories of language, vision, and the creative imagination as developed in his essay collection *The Man Made of Words*, this article aims to broaden our understanding of *Rainy Mountain* as a creative verbal/visual collaboration between father and son (and other voices) to re-create a tribe. This collaborative project chose to situate the land and interspecies relations at the center of Kiowa identity, thus challenging colonial interpretations that considered more-than-human beings as mere possessions, resources, or creatures from a mythical world. To further understand these two sets of relations, the sacred interdependence between images/words and human/more-than-human beings in the Kiowa tradition, I first delve into the verbal and visual revision of history, place, and ceremony carried out by the Momadays in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. I then consider visual modes and practices that were traditionally engaged in by the Kiowa and which are consciously reinserted by the Momadays in their text as a form or anti-colonial resurgence.²

These visual strategies challenge colonialist frameworks and styles that have misrepresented Native American histories and forms of telling. They also bring to the foreground central relationships of interdependence with the land and with the more-than-human beings that endowed Kiowa cultural and religious practices with further meaning. In doing so, this inaugural text of the Native American Renaissance contributed to decolonizing textual spaces and tribal representation in the late 1960s in two ways: through its anti-colonial blurring of Western disciplines and through the spiritual interconnection of humans, more-than-humans, and place at a time when American Indian religions remained banned.³ Words and images in *The Way to Rainy Mountain* are preeminently relational and place-based, they engage with the Oklahoma landscape and the multiple beings that dwell on it at material and spiritual levels that cannot be set apart. Al Momaday's illustrations vividly drew from Kiowa epistemology, historiography, spirituality, and social practice; for these images highlight traditional interspecies relations which are understood as sacred experience that must be acknowledged and respected.

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In his essay "The Native Voice in American Literature", N. Scott Momaday imagines a prehistoric man bearing a rudimentary object that has been previously soaked in pigment; he seems ready to inscribe his vision on the rock. This is a foundational moment for art and for literary expression since, Momaday argues, "all the stories of all the world proceed from the moment in which [this prehistoric man] makes his mark. All literatures issue from his hand" (1997: 13). The interconnection between image and word in Momaday's literary works is intimate, ever-present, and profound. Considered within a Kiowa epistemological framework, images and words "involve sacred matter"; they are connected to a particular cultural landscape and vision that becomes ceremonial because they have performative power (25). And, just as the traditional Kiowa vision quest was a central meaning-making practice for self and community, the artistic quest also exceeds the individual vision. All art is relational and purposeful, for it necessarily traces a web of connections that trigger transformation, strength, and responsibility for both the individual artist and for the community receiving it, embodying and infusing it with further meaning. The connections triggered by the images and the words are thus intrinsically powerful and sacred in the Kiowa context.

In this respect, Momaday's theories of literary and artistic creation are in line with Native American ecological worldviews that emphasize relationality and connectedness with the world, with the land, and with all living beings that inhabit a territory, human and more-than-human (Coulthardt and Simpson 2016).⁴ In his essay "Sacred Images", Momaday recounts his impression of the Altamira caves in the north of Spain, which shelter 14,000-year-old Paleolithic rock paintings. He describes the awe and delight experienced upon seeing the series of red-colored,

black, and ochre drawings featuring non-human animals: bison, horses, deer, goats, and wild boars. The bison on Altamira's ceiling are "grazing in eternity [...] seemingly alive, moving in the flickering light" (1997: 128). Looking at the prehistoric animals on the walls, Momaday can sense the love and respect the artist must have felt for the animals he inscribed on the rock. Both artist and bison gain continuous existence and meaning in relation to one another, for these animals, like "the buffalo and the horse to the Plains Indians of the nineteenth century . . . extended his human being to the center of wilderness, of mystery, of deepest life itself" (128). The animals on the cave walls become for Momaday a threshold that provides "sacred access to the world around", "a passage from time into timelessness" (128). Like the rock paintings in the American Southwest, Momaday identifies these engravings of animals and more-than-human beings as "the beginning of art [...] and] of literature", "the word made visible" for "imaging, imagining, incising, writing" are core principles in storytelling (129-130).

Momaday reckons that the contemplation of such prehistoric art is a profound, time-bending experience that leads us to recover the awe and delight of childhood while sharing a bit of the eternity held within human existence. Momaday's literary works are also imbued by these same forces and perceptions, and often explore the fundamental relationships forged between humans and more-than-human beings; sacred relationships that sustain creation and survival at the very intersection of identity, territory, image and story. As I argue throughout this essay, the visual, oral, and written modes of language constantly feed off each other in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. And more than any other, the Momaday's "visual mode" (Rainwater 1995: 377) contributed to establishing a relational framework of interdependence between humans, more-than-human beings, and the landscape that grounded the Native American Renaissance in the coming decades. In the sections that follow I examine this relational web spun with tribal identity, images, words, and interspecies connections in *Rainy Mountain*.

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1. *The Way to Rainy Mountain*: Kiowa Identity, Dialogical Structures, and Collective Voice

The Way to Rainy Mountain traces N. Scott Momaday's journey back to his grandmother Aho's house in Rainy Mountain, Oklahoma. This is both a physical journey through specific cultural geographies that have shaped the traditional stories and histories of the Kiowa (and the Momaday's own family history) from Wyoming to Oklahoma, and a memorial journey triggered by specific sites around Rainy Mountain and the family homestead. *Rainy Mountain* focuses primarily on the reconstruction of personal and tribal histories and identities and on debunking

colonial representation and destruction. It is an utterly relational work that aims to destabilize a rather Western understanding of history, literature, and artistic vision as individual and separate enterprises by challenging all literary and historical forms of categorization. It also functions as “a type of map or template for reclaiming worldviews” wherein the oral, in conversation with graphic modes of telling, contributed to the re-emergence of a Native-based critical and literary discourse during the so-called Native American Renaissance (Teuton 2010: 54). As Christopher Teuton poignantly argues, *Rainy Mountain* aimed to activate an emerging, Native-based, critical discourse (2010: 56). This “critical impulse arises out of a context of community consciousness, and it responds to the oral and graphic communicative needs of a community for survivance. Aside from basic material needs, cultural survivance depends on a community’s vibrant, active engagement with the worldview its members continually construct” (Teuton 2010: xviii). The words and images contained in this amazing little book have “remained vital, and immediate, for that is the nature of story” (Momaday 1969: ix), and part of that continuous vitality flows from its relational views, and from the interplay of the visual and verbal modes, throughout the book.

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Following a Preface, an Introduction, and a framing poem entitled “Headwaters”, Momaday’s piece is composed of three overarching sections (“The Setting Out”, “The Going On”, and “The Closing In”), which are divided into twenty-four shorter episodes (two-page narrative segments), each of which contains three interconnected passages or *voices*, as Momaday refers to them. These three voices are placed next to each other in a relational, dialogical manner on two facing pages, wherein each voice features a mythical story from the oral tradition, another from historical or anthropological documents, and a third one from Momaday’s own family history. The stories are all strongly grounded in the cultural landscapes of the Kiowa and in Momaday’s family and personal memories, which in the book run parallel to the history of the Kiowa tribe. The voices also refer to many human and more-than-human beings that shape and are shaped by these stories and that interconnect in an intimate, poetic manner.

All in all, these three dimensions, “myth, history, and memoir”, spin a “narrative wheel that is as sacred as language itself” (Momaday 1969: ix). They also blend with one another as the sections unfold, with characters that had been associated with one of the voices suddenly appearing in a different dimension, thus constructing “a polyphonic version of Kiowa historiography that questions traditional divisions between fact and fiction, history and myth” (Brígido-Corachán 2011: 114).

The mythical and historical narrative lines begin with the ancestral migration of the Kiowa from Yellowstone to the Southern Plains around the Washita River and

Rainy Mountain in the late 18th century (“The Setting Out”); the book then engages a selection of Kiowa stories at the peak of their so-called “Centaur Culture” in the 18th and early 19th centuries, when they ruled over the Plains (“The Going On”). It finally focuses on the rapid disappearance of their traditional lifestyle as a result of colonialism—a historical period and visual imaginary depicted in many epic tales of the American West (“The Closing In”).

Rainy Mountain foregrounds the deep ecological interconnectedness that was established between the self, the Kiowa community, the landscape, and more-than-human beings—a delicate balance that was ultimately brought down by colonialist conquest and the environmental and cultural destruction that ensued.⁵ This poetic blend of historical chronicle, traditional knowledge, and memoir also follows N. Scott Momaday’s self-reflective, personal journey as he strengthens his own cultural identity as a Kiowa and as an artist. For Donelle Drees, Momaday’s “stories illuminate the intimacy between language and tribal identity, and it is this tribal identity told through myth that Momaday seeks for deeper self-understanding” (2002: 30). *Rainy Mountain* is grounded in the performative and ceremonial power of verbal and visual language, and its multiple images are rendered as illustrations but also evoked through words in an ekphrastic manner.⁶ These images were later expanded and accompanied by family photographs in Momaday’s memoir *The Names* (1976) and have recently been reenacted in the documentary *Return to Rainy Mountain* (2017), directed and produced by N. Scott’s daughter, Jill Momaday.

In the following section I discuss key relational strategies between images and words, and human and more-than-human beings within a Native-based, anticolonial framework that aims to shed further light on the Momaday’s crucial role in establishing sovereign intellectual practices at the dawn of the Native American Renaissance.⁷

2. Kiowa Historicity, Pictographic Traditions, and Relational Frameworks

For many Native American tribes, visual expression and written expression are creative practices that are deeply entwined. In *The Common Pot*, Abenaki scholar Lisa Brooks tells us that writing and drawing share the same word in the Ojibwe and Abenaki language. In Abenaki, “the root word *awigha-* means ‘to draw’, ‘to write’, ‘to map’ while the word *awikhigan*, which originally described birchbark messages, maps, and scrolls, came to encompass books and letters” (Brooks 2008: xxi). Anishinaabe novelist Louise Erdrich similarly explains that “the words for *book* and *rock painting* are almost identical” in Anishinaabeg whereas “the root of

both these words, *mazina*, is ‘the root for dozens of words all concerned with made images and with the substances upon which the images are put’ including those of photographs, movie screens, and television sets” (in Brooks 2008: xx).⁸ Lisa Brooks offers other Native and also non-Native examples such as ancient Greek (where the term *graphos* refers to the acts of writing and drawing), and briefly discusses Mayan and Aztec codices and murals, which used pictographic symbols to tell their histories (Brooks 2008: xxi; see also Silko 1997: 21). The European scriptural tradition, with its progressive separation of images from words, has wrongly led Western cultures to believe that such a division was universal when it is actually not. In fact, for many Indigenous communities, “writing and drawing are both forms of image making” and are often combined in a “relational framework” (Brooks 2008: xxi).

In this context, it is important to note that N. Scott Momaday’s career as a painter began in the mid-1970s and that, in his numerous paintings and etchings, he has experimented with a variety of visual techniques and styles.⁹ In his literary works, N. Scott Momaday frequently engages these textual and visual modes in an interactive manner and identifies them as key components of the same imaginative act. As he points out in an interview, “writing is drawing, and so the image and the word cannot be divided” (Coltelli 1990: 96). On a different occasion, Momaday has also argued that “painting and drawing and writing are in some respects the same thing [...] writing is [...] a kind of drawing” (in Rainwater 1995: 378).

N. Scott Momaday’s “implicitly stated theory of images” is consistent through his literary work and he often ponders critically and aesthetically on the “act of looking” (Rainwater 1995: 376-377). Both Catherine Rainwater and Hertha Wong have identified a distinctively Native American way of perceiving and recording the world in Momaday’s visual and literary strategies.¹⁰ Whether as petroglyphs, ledger books, or hide paintings, Native forms of historical and aesthetic expression were often pictographic, where images played a central “role [...] in the formation and preservation of Native American thought and history” (Rainwater 1995: 379). Examining a diverse set of Plains Indians’ self-narratives from the 18th to the 20th centuries, Hertha Wong also claims that “the symbolic language of pictographs allowed pre-contact Plains Indians to ‘read’ about one another from painted robes, tipis and shields” (1992: 57). The Kiowa and Kiowa Apache often rendered their individual and tribal histories through pictographic painting on buffalo hides and Momaday himself describes legendary chief Dohasan’s *Do-giagya guat* or “tipi with battle pictures”, featuring several warrior scenes, in section XII of *Rainy Mountain*.

Arnold Krupat and Hertha Wong have described Native American life-writing as “dialogical” (Krupat 1989: 133), “relational”, or “communal” (Wong 1992: 13-

14). Native American identities are relational in the sense that they are understood as dynamic “selves-in-progress” that take into account the community and also the surrounding environments with their spiritual dimension (Wong 1992: 13-14). For Wong, such “relational self reflected deep connections not only to one’s people, but to the land and its natural cycles as well without leaving individuality completely aside, especially in the case of Plains Indian men” (38). Pictographic painting on tipis, for example, was often executed as a collective enterprise wherein the chief’s “personal vision” was carried out with the help of many other men, who acted as consultants or painters (33). This same collective impulse permeates the complex array of stories, images, and memories in *Rainy Mountain*.

In addition to painted tipis and shields, the most well-known Kiowa documents rendered in pictographic form were the 19th-century historical calendars, which took a circular rather than linear shape. The Kiowa calendar was known as *sai-guat*, which literally meant “winter marks” or “winter pictures” (Greene 2009: 1). The Kiowa selected and inscribed two symbolic images, a summer and a winter marker or count, to represent the year that had just ended in their calendars, which were kept by specific members of the community. According to Candance Greene, the Kiowa “word *guat*, which comes from the act of marking or painting, has continued in use to designate writing, and the charts must have served the calendar keepers much like written notes” (2009: 2). In a similar fashion, I believe that Al Momaday’s drawings do not have a mere supporting or illustrative function in his son’s book but are rather conceived as cues or memory triggers in a context of storytelling that recalls the images drawn in the historical calendars. As such, the images establish a strong sense of continuity with the particular intellectual and artistic tradition of the Kiowa. Each recalls a tribal story or relation and highlights key cultural details that may otherwise pass unnoticed by the reader. Contributing to this effect, the layout of the book is such that it is the stories that seem to emerge from the pictographic markers and not the other way around, as we will see in the next section. Moreover, each of these images features an animal or more-than-human being establishing a meaningful connection with a human character, further strengthening the Kiowa’s relational view of interdependence with the more-than-human worlds.

In this regard, we should note that a shorter version of the book, entitled *The Journey of Tai-Me*, had already been published in 1967, two years before *Rainy Mountain*.¹¹ This earlier version or “archetype” was released in a limited edition of 100 copies that were hand-painted and illustrated by American artist Bruce S. McCurdy, who contributed a series of abstract landscapes and figures in etchings to accompany the text.¹² These abstract landscapes were rather Western in style and did not consider the visual modes of Kiowa historicity and their intellectual

and creative expression. A central political move of the Momadays in *The Way to Rainy Mountain* was therefore to replace McCurdy's abstract etchings with Alfred Momaday's illustrations, which highlight concrete more-than-human beings and sites, and which are clearly reminiscent of the historical calendars and of their Kiowa heritage. As N. Scott Momaday has pointed out, "[m]y father was a traditional Indian artist, and his themes were Indian. He drew and painted peyote figures and buffalo hunters and did various kinds of mystical paintings. I think he comes directly out of the Kiowa artistic traditions which preceded him, and in some ways. [...] I follow in his tracks" (in Rainwater 1995: 378).

Although the Kiowa produced beautiful pictorial art in many forms such as paintings on buffalo robes, on 19th-century ledger books and sketchbooks, and through beadwork, the calendar pictures were comparatively "simple" and aimed to function as a "spare mnemonic figure" (Greene 2009: 4) that necessarily had to be expanded and complemented by the accompanying oral narration. *The Way to Rainy Mountain* follows this same stylistic pattern wherein the chosen image functions as a tribal marker, a foundational pillar for the story to build around, so that survivance will depend on the members of the tribe's "active engagement with their worldviews" (Teuton 2010: xviii) as well as on the continuous telling of the story.

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N. Scott Momaday's perception of the bison in the Altamira caves in Spain, a place far from the Southern Plains of North America and yet evocative of the same creative act, manifests his commitment with the intellectual legacy of the Kiowa. For Momaday, the Spanish bison had a deeper significance that exceeded its role in human history and the arts; the bison functioned as a fundamental threshold that connected two expressive forms: images and stories. The prehistoric paintings are a reminder of intimate interspecies relations around the world —the human/animal interdependence that was key to human survival. The visual/verbal and animal/human relations in Momaday's work thus understand time as continuous within a Native American circular framework, a historical circle of restoration, relationality, and permanence.

Interestingly, in Momaday's novel *The Ancient Child*, painter Locke Setman (Momaday's alter ego) sketches an imprecise figure on a small canvas which becomes one of his most successful works. It is vaguely described as a man on a horse in a "landscape of swirling colors [...] each describing a spatial dimension and all a succession of distances from the viewer's eye" (1989: 159). The watercolor painting is entitled *Venture Beyond Time* and it evokes the same all-encompassing relations we find in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. The centaur culture of the Kiowa and a circular sense of time within the land are made visible as spatial and emotional planes entwine in the painting and distance becomes relative. The transformative

power of interspecies connection is also conjured up through such human/animal contact. *Venture Beyond Time* is described in the novel as an ineffable experience of utter relationality —dissolving away onto the land and “becom[ing] one with the horse” while riding at fast speed (Momaday 1989: 161). We find a similar transformational experience leading to deeper understandings of place, community, and self through “interspecies communication” (Plumwood 2002: 189) in many of the illustrations featured in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*.

3. Visions, Relations, Resurgence. Al Momaday’s More-than-human Drawings in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*

In her book, *Creatures of Empire: How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America*, Virginia De John Anderson examines the effects of colonization and its violent reconfiguration of human/animal relations such as those upheld by the Kiowa. Favoring more-than-human beings over human figures and exploring complex interspecies encounters in all of the illustrations, *The Way to Rainy Mountain* can be considered an anticolonial work that significantly contributed to ground Indigenous resurgence, that is, the restoration of traditional Kiowa worldviews, practices, and relations through stories and images. *Rainy Mountain* uses eleven illustrations drawn by Al Momaday, some of which are also rendered in slightly reconfigured forms in the different book covers issued by The University of New Mexico Press. I will briefly discuss the significance of the book’s three cover designs before proceeding to tackle the illustrations within the book.

The first paperback edition, published in 1969, featured the famous “single knoll ris[ing] out of the plain in Oklahoma” (5) —the book’s most important site of memory. Overlooking Rainy Mountain, this cover also included a mythical looking buffalo, originally drawn by Al Momaday for section XVI, in the upper right corner. The cover’s watercolor landscape in sepia colors was painted by N. Scott Momaday himself. The mighty buffalo appears to be in full motion and we can only see the animal’s head and half of his body. We know that for the Kiowa “the buffalo was *the animal representation of the sun*, the essential and sacrificial victim of the Sun Dance” (3, emphasis added) and it is therefore symbolic that the buffalo seems to be rising in the Eastern corner, shining over the title. Later editions of the book, also issued by the University of New Mexico Press, have continued to display the sacred buffalo on their covers, but as a buffalo skull painted inside a Kiowa warrior’s shield. In one of these editions, in fact, we find three Kiowa warrior shields all set under the title in anticipation of the tryptic chapter structure readers will soon find inside.¹³

As Jacki Thompson Rand explains, the spiritual power of the buffalo was central to the Kiowa religion and that was the reason why buffalo were often featured in their shields. These shields were not just sources of protection and power, known amongst the Kiowa as *dwdw*, they connected personal narratives to such “spirit power” and were therefore key in the transmission of cultural and social values to Kiowa youth.

At the center of nineteenth-century Kiowa belief was the concept of *dwdw*, power or spirit force, which inhabited all things —animate and inanimate. *Dwdw* inhabited animals, the earth, sun, moon, and stars. Natural phenomena possessed varying degrees of *dwdw*, with the sun holding the strongest spirit power. Sun, addressed as “grandfather”, nurtured the spirit of the buffalo, making this mainstay of Kiowa materiality and diet one of the most powerful animals in spirit terms.¹⁴ (2008: 65)

The buffalo images featured on these covers reappear later in the book, with an accompanying caption taken from the mythical voice in the adjacent chapter. The alliterative caption “its steel horns flashed once in the sun” (Momaday 1969: 56) highlights the buffalo’s power and sacred connection to the sun. Another caption describes “a row of greased buffalo skulls” (69) which, in the accompanying story, are walked upon by a brave Kiowa man to save his brother.¹⁵ Pictographic accounts of the Kiowa, whether on tipis or shields, often depicted individual acts of bravery and were associated with their owners¹⁶. In *Rainy Mountain*, Momaday conjures up this specific tradition of Plains Indians tales of bravery or warriors’ coups when he narrates the feat of this Kiowa warrior keeping his foot over the greased buffalo skulls and saving his brother from the enemy (66). The buffalo “with horns of steel” also renders a warrior’s coup, a deadly combat between a Kiowa hunter and a buffalo (54). These images all set the buffalo as a central source of sustenance and spiritual power grounding key features of tribal identity: Kiowa nobility, bravery, and respect.

It should be stressed that these human/animal relations are not idealized by the text; the Kiowa were predominantly meat eaters (Momaday 1969: 25, 44) and both horses and buffalos were often used, sacrificed, and hunted down, but the bonds established with these animals were preeminently respectful and caring. The traditional Kiowa tale “The Passing of the Buffalo” conveys these values as follows:

When the people killed a buffalo, they did it with reverence. They gave thanks to the buffalo’s spirit. They used every part of the buffalo they killed. The meat was their food. The skins were used for clothing and to cover their tipis. The hair stuffed their pillows and saddlebags. The sinews became their bowstrings. From the hooves they made glue. They carried water in the bladders and stomachs. To give the buffalo honor, they painted the skull and placed it facing the rising sun. (Caduto and Bruchach 1991: 223)

The buffalo's sacred, nurturing, and medicinal functions are highlighted in many Kiowa tales. Buffalo laid at the center of the Sun Dance and, as Françoise Besson posits, they were also “the place of the written historical text, of the narrated story —since the history of the people was written on buffalo hides” (2014: 216). Thus, the steel-horned buffalo in *Rainy Mountain's* book covers and warrior shields reinsert human-animal interdependence as a key element of the Kiowa universe. And these ideas find continuity in the present in the text, for in the familiar voice of section XVI we learn about the unexpected encounter N. Scott and Al Momaday had with a small herd of buffalo and about their energetic escape from an understandably angry and protective mother cow. Of that encounter Momaday remembers, above all, the feeling of being “alive” in this “deep and beautiful” spring morning (Momaday 1969: 55). Like Momaday's vision of the bison in the Altamira cave, this mother buffalo also “extend[s] the artist's] human being to the center of wilderness, of mystery, of deepest life itself” (Momaday 1997: 128) through interspecies communication and respect.

In *Rainy Mountain* there are eleven illustrations featuring animals and more-than-human beings such as trees, stars, or a water beast, aside from the book cover (see figure 1). McAllister claims that the first six of these illustrations seem to belong to the “mythical” dimension while the remaining five, starting with the only human figure, a Kiowa warrior on a horse hunting a buffalo, are rather “historical” (1978: 25). For Besson, the animals featured in the story, whether mythical or historical, become “vehicles of collective memory” and symbols of resilience through their relation to the cosmos (2014: 221-222).

Two images reinforce the Introduction's Kiowa framework. The first illustration depicts a foundational story of the tribe: a Kiowa boy transformed into a bear chases his seven sisters up Devil's Tower. The bear's story can be referred to as ekphrastic, as it aims to describe and explain the strange shape of Devil's Tower (Clements 2001) and therefore establishes a powerful and sacred relation between the original form and the story/image that made it legendary amongst the Kiowa.¹⁷ Devil's Tower has a central role in Kiowa stories of origin as a sacred site of memory, but it is also strongly connected to Momaday's own identity. In 1934, when he was six months old, N. Scott visited this sacred site with his parents, Al and Natachee Momaday, and this place-based story prompted his Kiowa name, Tsoai-Talee, which in the Kiowa language means Rock-Tree-Boy (Brígido Corachán 2011: 115-116).

This place-based story highlights survival and transformation, but also relationality and continuance: the sisters are transformed into the seven stars of the Big Dipper and the number seven plays a meaningful role in the narrative, as we will discuss in a moment. The story also features another more-than-human being: a tree stump

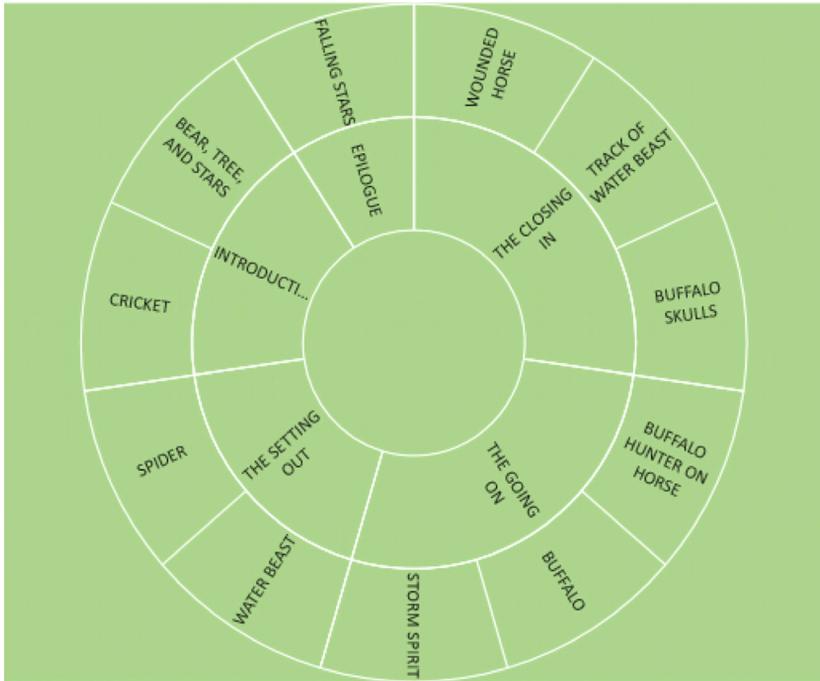


Figure 1. Illustrations in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*

who speaks to the girls, grows, and leads them to protection. As many environmentalist critics have pointed out, our existence has to be understood within relational frameworks of ecological interdependence. The tree demands that a nurturing and moral regard for human and more-than-human lives be established and this is what Whyte and Cuomo have identified as an “ethics of care” (2017: 2). In the story, the tree’s conscious action is instrumental to the salvation of the seven sisters and, thus, they all become a site of guidance (the stars) and place-based memory (the tree transformed into a mountain). In return, this ethical framework of interdependence and interspecies care will be transferred to the Kiowa tribe as well. This is the first illustration chosen by the Momadays to ground the book’s Introduction. It shapes the Momadays’ journey of self-reflection and opens a path to restore Kiowa ecological and cultural worldviews through image and writing. The bear’s claws forcefully inscribed in the bark of the tree are

perhaps a reminder of the visual and textual violence exerted by colonization over Indigenous cultures but also echo the messages written on birch bark by Northern Native cultures in pre-colonial times.

The book's Introduction includes a second relational illustration: a cricket circularly framed by the full moon as contemplated by N. Scott Momaday from his late grandmother's homestead. This circular shape or sacred hoop will be echoed by the last image of the book, which appears in the Epilogue. This closing illustration features the Leonid meteor shower that has been recorded as one of the earliest entries in the Kiowa historical calendars (Momaday 1969: 85). This last image does not depict animals but features seven stars as relational more-than-human beings in transformation, completing the cycle.

As Wong points out, these two "illustrations provide an associational circularity [...] both the first and last pictures deal with the relationship of the earth and the sky, and the human desire to ascend from one to the other" (1992: 167). They emphasize our relational, cosmic nature and also depict "a series of marks" indicating the "motion and direction" of the falling stars in the manner of "earlier pictographic coup accounts denot[ing] animal tracks or military movements" (Wong 1992: 167). For McAllister, the seven-star pattern in the last illustration represents the "unpeopling of the sky, the loss of those mythic kinsmen, a loss appropriate to the beginning of historical time" in the Kiowa calendars (1978: 25). But the number seven holds yet another meaning in the narrative. Aho, Momaday's grandmother, "was about seven when the last Kiowa Sun Dance was held in 1887 on the Washita River above Rainy Mountain Creek" when "the buffalo were gone" (Momaday 1969: 10). The seven-star pattern and the cricket framed by the moon in the grandmother's porch are a threshold connecting images and words, history and myth, Momaday and Aho, under the same cosmic worldview. In the documentary, *Return to Rainy Mountain*, Momaday in fact describes the story of the bear and the seven sisters as "a quantum leap of the imagination" that "relates us to the stars" (Momaday 2017: min. 15). Those same stars still shine over the family homestead. The circularity gives the book closure but also purpose and continuance.

The remaining illustrations that are interspersed within the book's three sections feature other sacred animals which are seen as either relatives (the nurturing grandmother spider and a Kiowa brother turned water beast in "The Coming Out") or as vital companions like the horse or the buffalo. These animals all have communicational abilities and guide the Kiowa in the mythical and personal passages of the book. Interestingly, the lines of text that have been chosen as captions to accompany these images are invariably dramatic and seemingly depict these more-than-human beings as menacing or frightening. The spider is described

as “larger than you imagine, dull and dark brown” (Momaday 1969: 28); the water beast creates “some awful commotion beneath the surface” (40), while the horse/fish shaped storm, Man-ka-ih, has tornado-making power with its tail “whipping and thrashing on the air” (50). The captions placed next to the images may remind some readers of pictorial plates in Edwardian novels. But the seemingly dramatic words and menacing-looking creatures relating to them are not scary once you engage with the stories of which they are a part. These more-than-human beings are deeply resignified by the stories themselves, where they are depicted as vital forces of nature or as close relatives of the Kiowa. They are indeed awe-inspiring and their mystery and singular actions have to be honored and remembered.¹⁸

The six illustrations included in the central and last sections entitled “The Going On” and “The Closing In” focus on two animals sacred to the Kiowa, buffalo and horses, marking the peak and later decline of Kiowa centaur culture (see figure 1). We have already pointed to the centrality of the buffalo for the Kiowa in the Southern Plains as an all-encompassing symbol of sustenance, medicine, and ceremony. In “The Morality of Indian Hating” Momaday elaborates on the significance of horses in Kiowa history and within his own family. Horses enabled the Kiowa to leave the ground, to “prevail against distance [...] to move beyond the limits of his human strength, of his vision, even of his former dreams” (1997: 68). On the horse, the Kiowa underwent a psychological change, he was “elevated to a height from which the far world was made a possession of the eye” (1997: 68). Christopher Teuton describes this vantage point as “the ability to see far [...] the expression of a worldview” (2010: 61):

In *The Way to Rainy Mountain* the concept of vision entails movement from alienation to knowledge, from lack of connection to a relationship with place, from a lack of cultural identity to a deeply felt cultural identity. More than an extension of physical sight, vision is a process of mediation that includes both physical sight and emotional insight. (Teuton 2010: 60-61)

Teuton interprets vision as the “critical impulse in a person’s relationship with place” —one that is “activated through the person’s imaginative engagement with place” (2010: 70). The Momaday’s critical vision connects words and images to the single knoll in the Oklahoma plains, to the family homestead, and to the human/more-than-human interactions that shaped the Kiowa tribe and themselves as Kiowa artists. The spirit power or *dwdw* of the Kiowa was often “represented in painted signs on animal bodies” while “the relationship between a man and a horse was grounded in the translation and sharing of power between mutually dependent man and animal” (Rand 2008: 66). These visual signs on the skin of the horse were “more than a mere amulet”, they were “materializ[at]ions of shared power”

(Rand 66) connecting horse and rider. We see another example of this spiritual connection in a personal experience shared by Momaday in section XXII, anticipating the illustration of a wounded horse. In this fragment Momaday remembers a set of horse bones belonging to his grandfather Mammedaty, those of Little Red. They were kept in a little box in the barn turned shrine at the family homestead. The memorial reverberations triggered by the encounter with these bones become an homage to Little Red's speed and might and also to Mammedaty's love for his horse. But they are also a reminder that the massive killing of the buffalo and the horse by colonial settlers deteriorated the Kiowa value system of kinship and violently "disrupt[ed] their foundations of sustenance" (Dietrich 2016: 14). Little Red's bones activate Momaday's process of *vision* and *mediation* (Teuton 2010: 60-61) and are therefore key in his critical movement from colonial alienation to cultural identity.

For Catherine Rainwater, Momaday's novels often present a "self-reflexive iconography" that reinforces "basic interconnections between the aesthetic structure of his works and the thought, emotion, belief, morality, and even personal identity represented therein" (1995: 376). In *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, these eleven self-reflexive images are both external and internal, rooted in place but also in tribal and personal resurgence. They highlight the reciprocal relationship of respect the Kiowa practiced when engaging more-than-human persons such as animals, water creatures, mountains, and stars, and indeed the land itself. The book is articulated both by the seemingly linear movement of Kiowa history through time but also by the circularity brought in through the tryptic textual structure and by the opening and closing figures, the seven stars. The relational stars conjure up the mythical and narrative origins of the Kiowa and a renewed literary beginning where visual and scriptural modes actively contribute to the resurgence of tribal worldviews and expression. This circularity also echoes the Kiowa calendars which, as we have seen, understood and represented history in a graphic and non-linear manner.

Throughout his texts, N. Scott Momaday highlights the 'act of looking' (Rainwater 1995: 377) through visual terms such as seeing, looking, watching, eye, sight, or point of view. He understands this act of looking or "seeing far" (Teuton 2010: 61) as a conscious action that expands one's vision of the world. It also signals the power and responsibility the artist holds seeing in this way. Animal-based images trigger memories and stories which in turn trigger actions in connection with the cultural landscape that unfolded and continues to unfold around Rainy Mountain. The act of looking becomes an act of remembrance and epistemological revelation and also one of continuance and anticolonial resurgence through "imaging, imagining, incising, writing" (Momaday 1997: 129).

Conclusion: Sacred Images and Words in *Rainy Mountain*

In his essay “Sacred Images”, right before his reminiscence of the Altamira bison, Momaday explains the creative and emotional web of images and words in his works as follows:

As a painter, I am concerned to understand the relationships between the artist and his subject for that relationship is ancient and sacred. To understand that relationship, even imperfectly, gives us a way to find our place in the world, to reckon the course of our journey from birth to death, and from Genesis to the edge of time and beyond. (1997: 127)

Rainy Mountain’s subjects are indeed N. Scott Momaday himself and his family in the Oklahoma homestead, but also the oral histories and pictographic traditions of the Kiowa rendered through a variety of complex human and more-than-human relations.

As we have seen throughout this essay, *The Way to Rainy Mountain* is not a mere memoir but a complex collaboration between a father and a son to reimagine a tribe, a dialogical piece that contains many voices and stories that are interrelated and transmitted in a scriptural and visual manner, following the pictographic traditions of the Kiowa. *Rainy Mountain* highlights Kiowa modes of visibility and textuality that are relational and associative, and a circularity that is historical and ceremonial, a “narrative wheel that is as sacred as language itself” (Momaday 1969: ix).

The visual and verbal strategies devised by Alfred and N. Scott Momaday clearly challenged 20th-century colonialist frameworks and textual styles through the blurring of artistic disciplines and through the vindication of a ceremonial context that is rooted in Kiowa history and culture. Their pioneering work is also a groundbreaking example of environmental care ethics in its poetic showcase of ecological interdependence and “interspecies communication” (Plumwood 2002: 189). Words and images in *The Way to Rainy Mountain* are preeminently relational and place-based, they engage the land and the human and more-than-human beings that dwell on it at material and spiritual levels that cannot be set apart. In doing so, *The Way to Rainy Mountain* contributed to establish a relational framework of grounded interdependence and responsibility between human and more-than-human beings and the land—one that continues to flourish in 21st century Native American literature, culture, and thought.

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Notes

1. In 1969 Momaday was also named Outstanding Indian of the Year by the American Indian community and became a member of the Kiowa’s Gourd Dance Society. He simultaneously achieved tribal and national recognition.

2. According to Edna Maniowabi and Leanne Simpson, resurgence is conjured up through the telling of stories transformed into collective theory — a theory that “maps away out of colonial thinking by confirming Indigenous lifeways or alternative ways of being in the world” (2013: 279).

3. The American Indian Religious Freedom Act was not passed until 1978. Prior to this, traditional religious ceremonies were prosecuted and banned.

4. Coulthard develops the concept of place-based relationality or grounded normativity in his already classic article “Grounded Normativity /Place-Based Solidarity” co-authored with Leanne Simpson (2016). See also Coulthard’s interview with Walia Harsha (2015).

5. On Momaday’s work considered within a Native American environmentalist and place-based identity framework, see Lee Schweninger’s *Listening to the Land: Native American Literary Responses to the Landscape* (2008) and Donelle Dreese’s *Ecocriticism. Creating Self and Place in Environmental and American Indian Literature* (2002). On Momaday’s text as biopolitical critique, see also René Dietrich’ “Biopolitics and Indigenous Literary Studies” (2016).

6. The relevance of ekphrasis as a key literary strategy in *Rainy Mountain* is developed by William Clements in his article “‘Image and word cannot be divided’: N. Scott Momaday and Kiowa Ekphrasis” (2001) and by Sandra Lee Kleppe in *Ekphrasis in American Poetry: The Colonial Period to the 21st Century* (2014). On the performative power of language in the Kiowa tradition and in N. Scott Momaday’s non-fiction works, see also Anna Brigido-Corachán’s “Wordarrows” (2012).

7. On the concept of intellectual sovereignty, see Robert Allen Warrior’s books *Tribal Secrets* and *The People and the Word* (1995). On *Rainy Mountain*’s intellectual or “critical impulse”, see also Christopher Teuton’s *Deep Waters* (2010).

8. See Louise Erdrich’s *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country* (2003).

9. Momaday’s visual work is not often exhibited outside the United States but some works can be accessed through the websites of museums and galleries such as the Smithsonian Museum of the American Indian (<https://americanart.si.edu/artist/n-scott-momaday-3380>), The JRB Art Gallery (https://www.jrbartgallery.com/artist/N._Scott_Momaday/works/680), or the Heard Museum (<https://heard.org/exhibits/momaday/>). Catherine Rainwater examines some of these paintings in connection with Momaday’s novels in her essay “Planes, Lines, Shapes, and Shadows: N. Scott Momaday’s Iconological Imagination” (1995).

10. See Rainwater's article (1995) for a more detailed exploration of Momaday's "visual mode" and "language of images" as rendered in his novels *House Made of Dawn* (1968) and *The Ancient Child* (1989). Rainwater also elaborates on Momaday's significant representation of bear figures in both novels, which are connected to Kiowa history and to his own life, as we will see later in this essay.

11. Printed at the University of California, Santa Barbara, this ur-text included a set of stories from the so-called mythical dimension, which later formed the core foundation of *Rainy Mountain*.

12. N. Scott Momaday refers to his original piece as an "archetype" in his "Acknowledgements" section (1969).

13. Arlene Elder examines the 1976 book cover edition featuring the three self-referential Kiowa shields in her analysis of Momaday's poetry collection *In the Presence of the Sun* (1999: 274).

14. It is important to note that power did not limit itself to physical might or force but included key values such as "discipline and balance, social responsibility, and the capacity to combine physical strength

with internalized rules of warrior behaviour" (Rand 2008: 67). On the buffalo's nurturing and spiritual power, see also Scott's classic "Notes on the Kado or Sun Dance of the Kiowas" (1911).

15. Momaday uses this same narrative strategy in *The Ancient Child* (1989), where each chapter title is a line that has been excerpted from the text that follows, weaving symbolic associations and anticipating what readers are about to encounter.

16. Hertha Wong examines the depiction of such warrior coups in the mythical voice of *Rainy Mountain* in *Sending My Heart Back across the Years* (1992: 66).

17. Devil's Tower is a striking geological formation in Wyoming that the Kiowa encountered in their migration journey from the Northwest to the Great Plains, sometime in the 17th century. The Kiowa called this formation Tsoai and the traditional story explains its strange shape while acting as a site of memory for the tribe.

18. For alternative readings of some of these images, see Wong (1992) and McAllister (1978).

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