



## In the shadow of Tsoai: the land, the stories and the People in N. Scott Momaday's *The Ancient Child*

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# EPI-REVEL

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## In the shadow of Tsoai: the land, the stories and the People in N. Scott Momaday's *The Ancient Child*

Kim van den Broecke\*

*Cet article explore la relation interdépendante entre le paysage, les récits et les peuples amérindiens. Une brève vue d'ensemble de l'importance du paysage dans l'axiologie amérindienne précède une étude du pouvoir de métamorphose / guérison du paysage dans *The Ancient Child* de N. Scott Momaday dans lequel le personnage Set est uni avec le mythe de Tsoai.*

The events in one's life take place, *take place*. How often have I used this expression, and how often have I stopped to think what it means? Events do indeed take place; they have meaning in relation to the things around them. And a part of my life happened to take place at Jemez. I existed in that landscape, and then my existence was indivisible with it. I placed my shadow there in the hills, my voice in the wind that ran there, in those old mornings and afternoons and evenings.<sup>1</sup>

The importance of the landscape in the Native American worldview — and naturally, therefore, the literature — has received considerable critical attention. The land figures in the interrelation between a tribe's<sup>2</sup> identity and its stories, as Leslie Marmon Silko explains: "[...] after all, the stories grow out of this land as much as we see ourselves as having emerged from the land there."<sup>3</sup> Anglo and Spanish names have nearly

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1 N. Scott Momaday, *The Names*, p. 142.

2 I am following Gerald Vizenor's preference for the term 'tribe' or 'tribal'. He comments in *Earthdivers*: "The author prefers the word *tribal* over other names for tribal people and cultures unless those names, such as *anishinaabe*, are transcribed from tribal languages [...]. There are limitations to the use of the word *tribal*, because the word suggests a colonial and political derogation of oral tradition and communal cultures. Notwithstanding the colonial usage, the author intends the word *tribal* to be a celebration of communal values which connect the *tribal celebrants* to the earth." p. xxi.

3 Leslie Marmon Silko, *The Delicacy and Strength of Lace*, Saint Paul, Greywolf Press, 1985, p. 24, cited by Robert Nelson, "Place and Vision: The Function of Landscape in *Ceremony*," p. 314.

eliminated original Native American placenames, and therefore a part of the evidence of their relation to tribal stories and the history and identity of a people. However, a linguistic reappropriation (of places as well as the space of the text<sup>4</sup>) is taking place in both tribal languages and in English. For example, the Apaches of the White Mountain reservation in Arizona have reclaimed their land through “linguistic remapping.”<sup>5</sup> “Every piece of ground here has its Apache name for a reason that is significant to the Apache people” says Apache Ronnie Lupe:

When you want to know about your history you can go to an encyclopedia or dictionary to look it up. But this [said as he dipped his hand in a mountain spring that has curative powers] is the root and the future of our people. We are discussing what to do with the stories.<sup>6</sup>

The Native American vision of the landscape includes the people which have emerged, as Silko stated, from the land; and as Kiowa author N. Scott Momaday notes, belong to the land. He writes that the first inhabitants of North America “must have beheld the Plains, and each man must have said to himself, ‘From this time on, I shall belong to this land, for it is truly worthy of my strength, my dreams, my life and death. Here I am. Here, *I am*’.”<sup>7</sup> This is in marked contrast to the colonizing gaze, in which the settlers and nature are dualistically opposed. The Europeans arriving in the ‘New World’ saw a wilderness (defined by *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* as “an uncultivated and uninhabited region”<sup>8</sup>) to be tamed and possessed. Thus was the ‘Indian’ invented, notes Jean Fisher in “Unsettled Accounts of Indians and Others” as “a phantasm constructed from a cacophony of signifiers isolated from their legitimate place in native schemata, motivated towards proving the inherent inferiority of native peoples, and destined to justify white claims to their lands.”<sup>9</sup> The Native American was made the ‘other’ to be

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4 Catherine Rainwater, in her article “The Semiotics of Dwelling in Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*” discusses the reappropriation of the text: “Silko’s drama of cross-cultural regeneration through semiosis takes place within yet another kind of space — the space of the written text — which has not been ‘home’ to the Native American storyteller until recently. Of the spaces available to the contemporary Indian, the space of the text is perhaps most profoundly appropriated, for as we have seen semiosis precedes reality, according to Silko’s opening invocation of Thought Woman, the Spider.” p. 231.

5 Lucy Lippard, *Mixed Blessings*, p. 113.

6 Quoted by Susan Rasky in *The New York Times* (August 4, 1988) in *Mixed Blessings*, p. 114.

7 Momaday, *The Ancient Child*, p. 244.

8 *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, p. 1402.

9 Jean Fisher, “Unsettled Accounts of Indians and Others,” p. 295.

brought under control along with the wilderness, and written as such into the colonizers' history:

The 'civilized' signs apparently lacking in Native American cultures circulate around the interpretation of inscription: the peoples were lacking Scripture [...] and private property (the physical demarcation of territory). Native American traditions of oral and pictographic transmission of history, their principles of communalism against individualism and private property, of absolute equivalence between the body and the land which rendered the latter unthinkable as a marketable commodity, were incomprehensible to the European [...]. Without written title to his name, his history, and his territory, the Native American body and its extension, the land, was to be the blank page upon which the colonizer could trace his own master narrative. Armed with the gun and the plough, the pen and eventually the camera, the colonizer was the author of his own myth, outside nature, outside the scene he inscribed and recorded.<sup>10</sup>

This colonizing opposition between landscape and self (as well as the "romantic vision of the earth that typically equates woman and nature, but that also typically commodifies both"<sup>11</sup>), differs radically from the Native American vision of the indivisibility of the landscape and the People. Author and critic Paula Gunn Allen explains:

We are the land. To the best of my understanding, that is the fundamental idea that permeates American Indian life [...]. The earth is the source and the being of the people, and we are equally the being of the earth. The land is not really a place, separate from ourselves, where we act out the drama of our isolate destinies; the witchery [a force which works against balance and harmony] makes us believe that false idea. The earth is not a mere source of survival, distant from the creatures it nurtures and from the spirit that breathes in us, nor is it to be considered an inert resource [...]. We must not conceive of the earth as an ever-dead other that

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- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 298. Native Americans are thus subject to a double bind, as when they do use the colonizers' language, they are accused of not being 'real' Indians. In a very interesting article on Pequot William Apess' *Eulogy on King Philip* (1836), Maureen Konkle writes "If Indians do not generally have sufficient military means to resist colonization, when they are literate in English they do have the intellectual means to resist in a state whose legitimacy balances precariously on the production of knowledge about the inherent difference of Indians. It is therefore in the settlers' best interest that Indians be kept as far away as possible from the practice of writing, that the claim be made that Indians who write are no longer really Indians, a claim that obliterates Indians historically and politically, if not physically. [...] the effects of both the historical and the contemporary production of knowledge about Indians are the same: the denial to Indians of the practice of writing, which is the denial of their political existence, of their resistance to colonialism, and ultimately of their ability to produce works of literature in English comparable to any other literary works." In "Indian Literacy, Colonialism, and Criticism," p. 476-477.
- 11 Catherine Rainwater, "The Semiotics of Dwelling in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*," p. 227.

supplies us with a sense of ego identity by virtue of our contrast to its perceived nonbeing. Rather, for American Indians [...] the earth is being, as all creatures are also being: aware, palpable, intelligent, alive.<sup>12</sup>

Similar to Allen's equation between American Indians and the land, Catherine Rainwater stresses the metaphysical importance of the connection between the land, tribal identity and the stories in her study of landscape in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*:

No mere 'horizontal' or geographical dwelling space of an isolated ego, 'home' for the Indian characters populating much contemporary fiction by Native American writers includes the 'vertical' or metaphysical space which the landscape informs, and to which the self is inextricably connected [...]. The story of a self emerges from the land in which the story of one's people has arisen.<sup>13</sup>

The landscape called 'home' necessarily informs both physical and metaphysical identity, health and harmony. William Bevis, in his article "Native American Novels: Homing In"<sup>14</sup> has found that in opposition to the 'setting out' tradition of Western literature, 'homing in' appears to be an aspect of many Native American novels: an alienated protagonist returns 'home' finding their place/identity/health/harmony through reintegration with their tribal stories and landscape.<sup>15</sup> We find this 'homing in' in many contemporary novels such as *House Made of Dawn* by N. Scott Momaday (1968). This work won the 1969 Pulitzer Prize and is considered the beginning of the 'Native American Renaissance,' in which Native American authors began enjoying critical and popular appreciation, though a good number of novels had been written by Native Americans before this. Other examples of 'homing in' may be found in *Ceremony*, by Leslie Marmon Silko (1977), *Winter in the Blood* by James Welch (1974), and *The Ancient Child* (1989), also by N. Scott Momaday.

Along the same lines as Bevis' theory of 'homing in', Paula Gunn Allen argues in her study of *Ceremony* that the protagonist Tayo's illness "is a result of separation from the ancient unity of person, ceremony,

12 Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*, p. 119.

13 Catherine Rainwater, "The Semiotics of Dwelling in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*," p. 221.

14 William Bevis, "Native American Novels: Homing In" Brian Swan and Arnold Krupat, *Recovering the Word*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1987, in Kathleen Donovan, *Coming to Voice: Native American Literature and Feminist Theory*, p. 21. The examples given feature male protagonists, and Donovan suggests that healing is further complicated in the case of contemporary urban Indian women, as "they also face problems that are distinctively female-gendered." p. 21.

15 *Coming to Voice*, p. 21.

and land, and his healing is a result of his recognition of this unity.”<sup>16</sup> Both Tayo and the land are healed through their reunification with each other and the stories:

This understanding occurs slowly as Tayo lives the stories — those ancient and those new. He understands through the process of making the stories manifest in his actions and in his understanding, for the stories and the land are about the same thing; perhaps we can best characterize this relation by saying that the stories are the communication device of the land and the people. Through the stories, the ceremony, the gap between isolate human being and lonely landscape is closed.<sup>17</sup>

The interdependent relationship between a People, their stories and the land is also explored in Momaday’s novel *The Ancient Child*. I would like to discuss a small part of this work — which has received surprisingly little critical attention considering Momaday’s complex achievement — specifically the role of the landscape in the protagonist Set’s metamorphosis into the bear-boy of Kiowa legend.<sup>18</sup>

As mentioned earlier, many critics consider Momaday the father of the so-called Native American Renaissance, since the Pulitzer-winning *House Made of Dawn* brought the Native American novel to public attention and into the university curriculum. With a Ph. D. from Stanford University, where he studied literature, Momaday was naturally influenced by the Western literary tradition as well as his Kiowa ancestry, and the Navajo and Pueblo communities in which he lived and his parents taught during his childhood.<sup>19</sup> Like *House Made of Dawn*, Momaday’s other works draw on these varied influences, such as his autobiographical work *The Names*, where Momaday recounts the Kiowa origin story, and we see the emergence of the Kiowas from the earth and into the landscape:

You know, everything has to begin, and this is how it was: the Kiowas came one by one into the world through a hollow log. They were many more than now, but not all of them got out. There was a woman whose body was swollen up with child, and she got stuck in the log. After that, no one could get through, and that is why the Kiowas are a small tribe in number. They looked all around and saw the world. It made them glad to see so many things. They called themselves *Kwuda*, ‘coming out.’<sup>20</sup>

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16 Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop*, p. 119.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 120.

18 The existing body of criticism concerning *The Ancient Child* includes two enlightening studies of Momaday’s ‘equation’ between verbal and graphic expression: Catherine Rainwater’s “Planes, Lines, Shapes and Shadows” and Matthias Schubnell’s “Locke Setman, Emil Nolde and the Search for Expression.”

19 Matthias Schubnell, *N. Scott Momaday*, p. 16–17.

20 *The Names*, p. 1.



In *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, Momaday relates the migration of the Kiowa tribe from the Yellowstone headwaters, east to the Black Hills, and then south to Rainy Mountain in Oklahoma. For the mountain tribe, imagines Momaday, to enter onto the open southern Plains must have indeed been an emergence: "There is a perfect freedom in the mountains, but it belongs to the eagle and the elk, the badger and the bear. The Kiowas reckoned their stature by the distance they could see, and they were bent and blind in the wilderness."<sup>21</sup> On their journey, the Kiowas stopped at what is now called Devil's Tower, but which was named Tsoai by the Kiowas, meaning Rock-tree. According to Momaday, the tribe created a story for the impressive landmark "because they could not do otherwise."<sup>22</sup>

Momaday's version of the Tsoai story tells of eight children playing.<sup>23</sup> Suddenly the brother becomes a bear and pursues the seven sisters, who are saved by climbing a tree which takes them into the sky. There the sisters become the stars of the Big Dipper, and the tree becomes a rock which still bears the scores from the boy-bear's claws. "From that moment" says Momaday, "and so long as the legend lives, the Kiowas have kinsmen in the night sky. Whatever they were in the mountains they could be no more."<sup>24</sup> Thus the Kiowas created part of their new existence and identity in terms of their new landscape.<sup>25</sup> This story appears in numerous works by Momaday, and becomes the semi-autobiographical basis for his novel *The Ancient Child*.<sup>26</sup> The repetition

21 N. Scott Momaday, *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, p. 7.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 8. Dakota artist Oscar Howe feels the landscape has certainly influenced Dakota art: "Dakota woodland Indians experienced multiple movements in woodland nature so the designs were small and circular and the Dakota plains Indians experienced more space and less of terrain so geometric art resulted." Oscar Howe, "Theories and Beliefs — Dakota," *South Dakota Review* (Summer 1969), p. 77.

23 Randall C. Davis explores other versions of this story, including Kiowa Gary Kodaseet's grandmother's story, in which a girl becomes the bear (Randall C. Davis, "Something Other and Irresistible and Wild," p. 82). As this story is part of the oral tradition, it is not static, fixed in print, but open to adaptation on the part of the different generations of storytellers, to reflect and influence the change around them. As the medicine man Betonie tells Tayo in *Ceremony*, "things which don't shift and grow are dead things." P. 126.

24 *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, p. 8.

25 Momaday suggests as well that "So deeply involved with this landscape are those who live within it that it may be said to determine human thought and expression." Momaday, "The Land Inspired the Artist [review of *American Indian Painting of the Southwest and Plains Area*, by Dorothy Dunn]", *Book Review, New York Times* (28 July 1968), p. 6-7, cited in Schubnell, *N. Scott Momaday*, p. 85.

26 Louis Owens suggests Momaday has invested half of his identity in the female protagonist Grey, and the other half in Set, the male protagonist. *Other Destinies*, p. 121.

of material in his writing is due to his sense that history and the present are part of one ongoing story, and “we tell it endlessly because we must; it is the definition of our being.”<sup>27</sup> Momaday comments elsewhere:

I think of all of my work as being one story, so there are obvious connections between *House Made of Dawn* and *The Way to Rainy Mountain* and *The Names* and *The Gourd Dancer*, and I think *Set* [the working title for *The Ancient Child*] is another chapter in that long story. It proceeds out of the same prehistoric legendary experience and it comes about quite naturally.<sup>28</sup>

The story of the bear-boy is an important part of Kiowa identity, and an even greater part of Momaday’s own identity. In the beginning of his autobiography *The Names*, Momaday writes:

My name is Tsoai-talee. I am, therefore, Tsoai-talee; therefore I am.

The storyteller Pohd-lohk gave me the name Tsoai-talee. He believed that a man’s life proceeds from his name, in the way that a river proceeds from its source.<sup>29</sup>

In Kiowa, Tsoai-talee means rock-tree boy. When he was six months old, Momaday was taken to Tsoai and given his name. His account of Set’s metamorphosis is in part an exploration of his own identity:

I think that if I can come to know more than I do about the boy who turned into a bear, through the imaginative process of writing about it, I will know more about myself [...]. I’m curious about the story, but my curiosity stems directly from the fact that I am involved in that story. My name proceeds from that story [...]. I think there have been many reincarnations of the boy bear across time. I simply happen to be a current one.<sup>30</sup>

In his novel *The Ancient Child*, Momaday, both writer and accomplished painter, portrays the transformation of visual artist Locke Setman into the Kiowa bear-boy. The work is a blend of autobiography, history, fiction, Kiowa stories and Momaday’s poetry, along with other previously published passages which are attributed to various characters in the novel. Momaday writes after the title page

This is a work of fiction. Henry McCarty, alias Billy the Kid, is a figure out of history, as are those who immediately surround him, notably Pat Garrett, Bob Olinger, J. W. Bell, and Sister Blandiana Segale. So are Set-angya and Maman-ti figures out of history. To one extent or another, all are put to fictitious use.<sup>31</sup>

27 *The Ancient Child*, p. 217.

28 Charles Woodward, *Ancestral Voice*, p. 128.

29 *The Names*, page before prologue.

30 *Ancestral Voice*, p. 17–18.

31 *The Ancient Child*, before Prologue.



He follows this disclaimer with a quote from Borges "For myth is at the beginning of literature, and also at its end."<sup>32</sup> So even before the first chapter begins, the reader is alerted to the coming blend of various genres. In the body of the work, the 'mythic' Kiowa story passages are distinguished from the rest of the novel by a change in typeface, and the writing and reading of the female protagonist, Grey (in fact written over a period of time by Momaday<sup>33</sup>) is in a third typeface. However the 'historical' passages concerning Billy the Kid, which are Grey's visions, are in the same typeface as the 'fictional' account of Set, which is a reworking of the Kiowa boy-bear myth. Though the differences in typeface lead us as readers to separate the genres, we begin to notice a blurring between history, myth, autobiography and fiction.<sup>34</sup> For example, the passage on pages 14–15 begins with the traditional story invocation "Ah-keah-de". Momaday explains: "When Pohd-lohk told a story he began by being quiet. Then he said *Ah-keah-de*, 'They were camping,' and he said it every time. I have tried to write in the same way, in the same spirit."<sup>35</sup> This traditional invocation, along with the typeset of the passage, which begins the Tsoai/bear-boy story, distinguishes it from the narrative of Set. However, in a Tsoai story passage, an old woman named Koi-ehm-toya watches the eight children go off to play, and we later find out in the Set narrative that the Kiowa name of the young medicine woman Grey, who is instrumental in Set's metamorphosis and thus in continuing the Tsoai story, is also Koi-ehm-toya. One of Set's relatives, Jessie, says of Grey "Sometimes when you listen to her talk, you'd think she's old herself. She can talk like an old, old woman."<sup>36</sup>

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32 *Ibid.*

33 Momaday originally intended a series of Billy the Kid poems to be included in his collection of poetry *The Gourd Dancer* (1976) but then decided to include only one of these poems. Referring to this series, Momaday comments "I knew that I wanted to publish them somewhere, and I kept thinking about maybe including them in a book of poems, maybe extending the sequence. There are now twenty-one pieces, one for each year of Billy's life." *Ancestral Voice*, p. 129. These twenty-one poems are included in *The Ancient Child* as well as *In the Presence of the Sun* (1992).

34 I am much indebted to Kimberly Blaeser's fascinating study of similar cases of genre blurring in her article "*The Way to Rainy Mountain: Momaday's Work in Motion*," where she suggests that Momaday's text, by drawing established boundaries into question, has implications for the way readers interpret Native American culture: "What can the reader make of this crossing of boundaries, this breaking of form? Does this textual movement attack or destroy the intellectual notion of categorizing experience into genres, which includes implied judgment with value based on factual content? [...] Does it call into question the idea that Native American culture must remain static to be authentic and offer instead a view of evolving myth?" p. 46.

35 *The Names*, page before Prologue.

36 *The Ancient Child*, p. 69.

As he alerts us in his disclaimer, Momaday has appropriated both history and Kiowa stories, and even in Momaday's appropriation of the story of Billy the Kid we find the importance of the landscape. The first chapter of *The Ancient Child* concerns the death of Billy the Kid, who has influenced both the heroine Grey and Momaday himself.<sup>37</sup> The reader continues to hear of Billy through Grey's 'visions' and in her chapbook — a collection of poems and short prose passages — which ends with a poem on Billy's death (published by Momaday in 1976 under the title "Wide Empty Space with a Death in the Foreground"<sup>38</sup>). Similar to Momaday's existence as 'indivisible' with the landscape, Shubnell notes

Billy the Kid's physical disintegration is depicted as a merging with the landscape. His spirit becomes inseparable from it. Since the physical and legendary landscape are identical, Billy the Kid's death does not result in annihilation: 'Death displaces him / No more than life displaced him; / He was always here.'<sup>39</sup>

In Chapter 13, the reader is introduced to the male protagonist Set, who is struggling with the "danger of losing his soul" to the critics and buyers who have begun to determine his work.<sup>40</sup> Orphaned at a young age, Set (meaning bear in Kiowa) was separated from his home landscape. Years later, he receives a telegram telling him Grandmother Kope'mah is dying, and Set decides to discover his 'home'. He finds on his arrival that Grandmother Kope'mah has died, and considers the trip to be a failure, though in fact it is the first stage of his metamorphosis:

He had a strange feeling there, as if some ancestral intelligence had been awakened in him for the first time. There in the wild growth and the soft glowing of the earth, in the muddy water at his feet, was something profoundly original. He could not put his finger on it, but it was there. It was itself genesis, he thought, not genesis in the public domain, not an Old Testament tale, but *his* genesis.<sup>41</sup>

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- 37 Regarding Momaday's appropriation of the legend of Billy the Kid, Shubnell notes "In superimposing his imagination on one of the classic western heroes, Momaday deals, in a sense, with the oral tradition of the American frontier in much the same way as he explores imaginatively the oral tradition of his Kiowa ancestors." *N. Scott Momaday*, p. 248.
- 38 "Wide Empty Landscape with a Death in the Foreground," in *Carriers of the Dream Wheel*, ed. by Duane Niatum (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), p. 90, as noted in *N. Scott Momaday*, p. 254.
- 39 *Ibid.*
- 40 *The Ancient Child*, p. 36. Shubnell suggests Set's struggle is similar to that of artist R. C. Gorman, in "Locke Setman, Emil Nolde and the Search for Expression," p. 477.
- 41 *The Ancient Child*, p. 64.

When Set arrives at the home of his father's family, he sees a boy in the brush arbor seeming to peer "out of the depth of a cave".<sup>42</sup> The boy, as Shubnell notes, is a vision connecting Set to the Kiowa bear-boy story, the story of Tsoai.<sup>43</sup> Before leaving Oklahoma to return to San Francisco, Set accompanies the family to a meeting of a Kiowa dance society. The description of the Kiowa camp, and Set's strange excitement, reflect the description of a Kiowa camp related in the traditional style Kiowa story on pages 14–15 — a passage beginning the Tsoai story — which again links Set to the bear-boy.

Though Set returns to San Francisco, the vision of the boy and his contact with the landscape of his people continue to haunt him. Even his painting, suddenly driven by a "keen urgency"<sup>44</sup> reflects the change in him. Though consciously unaware of the instrumental importance of the horse to the golden age of the Kiowa — with which "Their nomadic soul was set free"<sup>45</sup>, and symbolized in many of Momaday's works in his iconological use of the centaur<sup>46</sup> — Set paints a watercolor of a man on a horse, in which he feels "the impression was that of the horseman passing from time into timelessness."<sup>47</sup> It is not until the owner of the Paris gallery where he shows the piece remarks how his centaur painting reminds her of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and his description of the centaur, where "the Red Indian becomes one with the horse"<sup>48</sup>, that Set begins to take note of the changes happening within himself.<sup>49</sup> Alone back in San Francisco, Set does not understand, nor is he able to deal

42 *Ibid.*, p. 61.

43 Shubnell, "Locke Setman, Emil Nolde, and the Search for Expression," p. 473.

44 *The Ancient Child*, p. 104.

45 *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, p. 4.

46 Momaday's use of images in *The Ancient Child* is similar to that in *House Made of Dawn*, on which Rainwater comments "Momaday's icons do not merely collectively restate a 'theme' in visual imagery; each icon contains a story or a fragment of a story (from or based on Kiowa, Pueblo, and Navajo culture) that the potential reader interpolates into the ongoing story of Abel. Unlike conventional, syntactic language, Momaday's 'language of images' does not depend upon linear sequencing to convey meaning. Indeed, the circular relationship of the icons in the novel suggests that no matter where in Abel's story the reader might initially enter (one might begin anywhere), he or she would ultimately end up completing the narrative circle to gain a complete impression." Catherine Rainwater, "Plains, Lines, Shapes, and Shadows: N. Scott Momaday's Iconological Imagination," p. 382.

47 *The Ancient Child*, p. 159. Passing into timelessness connects the Kiowa stories to the appropriation of the Billy the Kid stories, and Momaday's play with time in the novel, which unfortunately is outside of the scope of this article.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 161.

49 Before his trip to Oklahoma, Set's lover Lola also commented that the character in one of his paintings is "about to be transformed." *Ibid.*, p. 107.

with the bear, the metamorphosis *taking place* within him. He has visions of a bear approaching him, and feels

the terrifying conviction that [...] he would dissolve in the hot contamination of the beast and become in some extreme and unholy amalgamation one with the beast. The infinite milky sky, glittering with amber stars, consoled him barely.<sup>50</sup>

Soon after, Set is found unconscious in his studio with the opened medicine bundle Grey had given him. Set is connected to the story and the land through the medicine, which has “upon and within it, the odors of bear grease, of mold, of death, of deep, humid earth run through with bitter roots.”<sup>51</sup> The medicine, and his difficult metamorphosis, are too strong for Set, and he is taken to a mental hospital, believed to be suffering from a nervous breakdown. But as with Tayo and Abel, psychiatry cannot heal Set’s condition, which is a result of separation from the land and the stories. Set’s psychiatrist Dr. Terriman tells him “You see, Locke, the bear is an ancient symbol of the perilous aspect of the unconscious”, yet the bear proves more perilous for the doctor, for “Two of Terriman’s teeth were broken, and his upper lip was lacerated; he required stitches.”<sup>52</sup>

Released from the hospital, Set is taken to his father’s family in Oklahoma, and there Grey, who understands his condition, begins to care for him and prepare him for his confrontation with the bear, his metamorphosis. She takes him toward Tsoai via *Dine Bideyah* — Navajo country — to her mother’s home in Lukachukai, which she describes as “*hózhón’i!*”<sup>53</sup> The journey begins to heal him, as Grey explains to Set:

“It,” she said, sweeping her hand along the horizon, “does you good.”

“I feel good today,” Set answered.

“Yes, the air, take it in; it does you good. Place your hands in the snow; lay them on the warm, sunlit sand. Stand against the wind. Sing to the earth; it does you good [...]. The journey must do you good. That is why we make it. You are gaining strength; you have

50 *Ibid.*, p. 215.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 242. In a later ceremony serving both to aid Set and unite him with Grey, (and begin a new ‘calendar’ as Rainwater notes in “Momaday’s Iconological Imagination,” p. 384) the priest uses “mountain earth” from the Chuskas, p. 298.

52 *The Ancient Child*, p. 242.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 269. As defined in a Navajo-English Dictionary: “it (space or area) is beautiful, clean, nice”, p. 95. “In the Navajo sense of the word, beauty represents goodness, happiness, health, harmony” notes Donovan, p. 136. The Navajo language is apparently especially rich for describing landscape. Momaday has commented: “I believe that only in *dine bizaad*, the Navajo language, which is endless, can this place [Monument Valley] be described, or even indicated in its true character.” *The Names*, p. 69.

to be strong. You will need great strength for what you must do. You *will* be strong, equal to the thing you must do.”<sup>54</sup>

Though Set still struggles from violent attacks of sickness, fear and disorientation, he continues his healing in Grey’s care, and begins to run. This is not only significant as it is part of the Tsoai story, but connects him as well with Navajo and Pueblo traditions such as the *Dawn Runners*. Momaday has used this iconological image<sup>55</sup> of the runner in *House Made of Dawn*, which begins and ends the novel. By the end of the novel Abel is healing and regaining harmony, and his running, as Robert Nelson notes in *Place and Vision*, is contextualized by the stories and the land.<sup>56</sup> According to Shubnell, Abel’s running “manifests an act of integration” with the universe<sup>57</sup>. Like Abel, Set’s growing strength is due to his painting, drawing, and running in the context of the land:

In the early mornings, when he inhaled the cold air that ran down from the mountains, and when he touched the earth through the soles of the moccasins Lela and Grey had made for him, he knew how glad he was to be alive [...]. It seemed to him he could see a little farther into the distance each day [...]. He ran until the sweat streamed on his body, and he tasted the salty exertion at the corners of his mouth, and he ran on until his breathing came in time with his stride and his whole body was fitted into the most delicate and precise rhythm. He entered into the current of the wind, of water running, of shadows extending, of souls rising up and falling away.<sup>58</sup>

Finally, Set journeys to Tsoai seeking a vision of the bear. After fasting four days and camping in a carefully chosen spot on the edge of a clearing on the east side of the rock, Set looks on the moonlit monolith:

Tsoai, the rock tree, loomed before and above him in the moonlight. It was changing in the motion of the moon, and it seemed alive. Shapes and shadows shifted upon the great green igneous columns, upon the huge granite planes, across the long black vertical fissures. Set stood in awe of Tsoai [...]. As he looked, the stars of the Big Dipper gradually appeared over it. They became brighter and brighter, riding over the north edge of the rock tree, revolving down the sky. And when he brought his focus back upon the monolith, a strange pitch-black shadow lay upon it, near the base. It was the image of a great bear, rearing against Tsoai. It was the vision he had sought.

54 *The Ancient Child*, p. 275.

55 As earlier, I am following here Catherine Rainwater’s use of the term in her article “Plains, Lines, Shapes, and Shadows: N. Scott Momaday’s Iconological Imagination”, p. 382.

56 Robert Nelson, *Place and Vision*, p. 44–45.

57 *N. Scott Momaday*, p. 138.

58 *The Ancient Child*, p. 295–296.

In this vision, Set is joined to the story and the land. We see the interrelation between the characters and the landscape, which takes on, as in *House Made of Dawn*, the importance of a character itself:

Momaday is doing much more here than providing the conventional element of 'setting' for his novel: the landscape, as it is described, has a life of its own that precedes and also contextualizes the other, secondary forms of life, including human lives, that have learned to coexist with the nature of this place over the centuries.<sup>59</sup>

Speaking more generally of Native American literature, "the geophysical landscapes that precede and at least partially determine the social or cultural ones" notes Nelson "serve not only as the 'settings' of these fictions but also as principal 'characters' in them."<sup>60</sup> As character or setting, the landscape has an undeniable interrelation with the life of the tribes and their stories:

To be sure: cultural identity, for the individual as for the People, depends upon keeping the stories alive — by re-telling them, by re-living them, and even by revising or adding to their ensemble to accommodate the new realities and 'shape' of the world as it changes. To be equally sure, though: such revitalization depends intimately on those stories' being constellated, and if necessary re-constellated, to the shape and pattern of the Place itself.<sup>61</sup>

For the reader of *The Ancient Child*, the boundaries between autobiography, myth, fiction and history — and as Blaeser suggests, the idea that "Native American culture must remain static to be authentic"<sup>62</sup> are called into question. Momaday leaves no doubt, however, as to the inextricable connection between the land, the stories and the People.

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59 *Place and Vision*, p. 45.

60 *Ibid.*, p. 8. J. Frank Papovich, in his article "Landscape, Tradition and Identity in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*" also comments on Momaday's work: "The role of landscape in *The Way to Rainy Mountain* is inextricably connected to the interplay of the three narrative voices. The first or legendary voice defines the traditional sense of man's relationship to the land [...]. Man is not a separate observer of the sublimity of nature but is rather an active participant in the natural world. He lives not close to the landscape but embedded in it. The second or historical voice traces the long record of the Kiowas within the landscape. This history does not chronicle the Kiowas' struggle to settle the land but instead recalls the events which constitute the tribe's literal connection to the land. And the third, the personal, voice details a precise personal vision that moves from observation of the landscape to an understanding of the legendary and historical role of the land in man's sense of place and self." P. 14-15.

61 *Place and Vision*, p. 314.

62 *Momaday's Work in Motion*, p. 46.



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