

**Answering the Arrowmaker's Challenge: Autobiography as a
Model of American Indian Literary Nationalism
in *The Way to Rainy Mountain***

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In recent years, scholars Craig Womack (Muscogee [Creek]) and Robert Warrior (Osage) have taken up Simon Ortiz's 1981 call for nation-based interpretation of tribal literature¹ in developing the controversial critical theory American Indian Literary Nationalism.² Warrior posits that Native nonfiction writing constitutes an intellectual tradition and that using it in our critical and scholarly work can improve the intellectual health of our tribal communities.³ Womack stresses that each tribe needs to discern and develop its own canon and theories of literary interpretation based on lived experience as a tribal member, as well as symbolism and methods of interpretation passed on through oral tradition. In his book *Red on Red: Native Literary Separatism*, Womack models the method of what would become AILN reading by using it to examine several pieces of Creek literature, from an oral legend to contemporary poetry. At the center of Womack's theory is the reader's lived experience in the tribe whose literature is being analyzed. The placement of autobiographical passages in Kiowa writer N. Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain*⁴ models the action of AILN reading and the place of story/literary interpretation in autobiography as a genre.

In 1969, Momaday became the first Native American to win a Pulitzer Prize for his groundbreaking novel *House Made of Dawn*, whose main character is from the fictionalized Jemez Pueblo and is based on several of the people Momaday met during his years in New Mexico. Because of the fame of *HMD*, Momaday was a well-known writer when *The Way to Rainy Mountain* was published later that year to a mixed reception from critics and readers, as outlined in Kenneth Lincoln's study of the book's publication history

In January 1967, Momaday had published an essay on Kiowa legend titled "The Way to Rainy Mountain" which became the limited-edition *Journey to Tai-Me*, and *JTM*, with the addition of autobiographical passages and illustrations, ultimately became *WRM*

¹ "Towards a National Indian Literature: Cultural Authenticity in Nationalism." *MELUS* 8.2 (Summer 1981): 7-12.

² It was originally called Native Literary Separatism by Craig Womack, but more recent scholarship labels it American Indian Literary Nationalism, hereafter AILN.

³ Following Warrior and Womack, I will use "Native" or "indigenous" to describe the multi-tribal group of people whose ancestors are native to the Americas.

⁴ I will follow the convention of citing Momaday's works thus: *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (*WRM*); *Journey to Tai-Me* (*JTM*); *House Made of Dawn* (*HMD*).

(Schubnell 145). But Momaday's inspiration for *WRM*'s final structure was not entirely based on literary considerations. Right after *HMD* was published, Momaday found out that the sacred Tai-Me bundle of the Kiowas was in Oklahoma. His visit to the sacred object was a spiritual experience which resulted in "the realization that he had a responsibility in the fragile chain of Kiowa oral tradition" (Schubnell 30). Later that year, *HMD* won the Pulitzer, Momaday was inducted into the Kiowa Gourd Society (a highly respected ceremonial warrior society), and *WRM* was published (Schubnell 32). Of the book's decidedly autobiographical purpose, Momaday said in an interview,

I'm not concerned to write the history of a people except as that history bears upon me directly. When I was writing *WRM*... I was dealing with something that belongs to the Indian world, and the Kiowa people as a whole, but I wasn't concerned with that so much as I was concerned with the fact that it meant this to me – this is how I as a person felt about it. And I want my writing to reflect myself in certain ways – that is my first concern" (qtd. in Schubnell 148-9).

Unfortunately, the critical and social climate of his time placed all Native writing, especially nonfiction, squarely in the realm of ethnography, a categorization which continues to be disputed today. Warrior, who sees Momaday's autobiographical work as a way of "laying claim to [the genre] not in its 'as-told-to' ethnographic mode, but with the modern hallmark of individual authorship and originality" (153), also notes a "paucity" (144) of works on Momaday's nonfiction as such. Although Warrior is referring to Momaday's essays, the same might be said of scholarship on *WRM* as an autobiographical work.

The book's unusual form, as well as its inclusion of several genres, is the main reason few critics are willing to study it as autobiography or even nonfiction. The book, which is dedicated to Momaday's parents, begins and ends with lyrical poetry: "Headwaters" at the beginning, and "Rainy Mountain Cemetery" at the end. It includes a prologue and introduction, and an epilogue. In between, the book is separated into three sections: "The Setting Out," "The Going On," and "The Closing In." Within these larger sections are twenty-four smaller sections, each with three passages in three different typefaces. On the left-hand side appears a transcription of a story told to Momaday, usually by his grandmother. At the top of the right-hand side is a related historical or ethnographic passage. Below the historical passage is a related autobiographical passage. Throughout the book are ink drawings by Momaday's father, accompanied by phrases pulled from within the passages.

Even before the book's publication, critics argued about the placement of *WRM* in a genre, and Momaday himself realizes that he is using language, and the arrangement of it, in a new way. Lincoln describes *WRM* thus: "Neither novel nor ethnography strictly speaking *WRM* represents a hybrid set of text emerging through the hollows of cultural history" (115). Attempting to describe what would later become the autobiographical passages of *WRM*, Momaday wrote in correspondence that he "would like to write a commentary, a kind of associative and autobiographical sketch of some kind, one for

each of the tales, and of about the same length...these will be lyrical prose sketches, hopefully very precise and rhythmical, like poems. Though I don't like the term, I have 'prose poems' in mind" (qtd. in Lincoln 112). Momaday later wrote of the book, "My work...isn't poetry, of course. But that there is something in addition to poetry and prose, some grafting of the two, something in the delicate balance of transformation, perhaps" (qtd. in Lincoln 114). Schubnell, following Momaday, labels the work "prose poetry" (34) but suggests, as several critics do, that *WRM* should not be read as non-fiction but as a product of Momaday's imagination (148) – a problematic placement in light of the book's (and many Native tribes') questioning of European concepts of boundaries between "reality" and "imagination," especially as these concepts are embodied and enacted in language.

Schubnell notes that Momaday's view of writing is "rooted in the belief that man's existence and reality find their fullest manifestation in language" (40). This view of language informs Momaday's controversial theory of "blood memory," which is explained by Blaeser thus: "Momaday, the reader/creator, comes to the view that racial memory, like blood, passes from one generation to the next and storytelling awakens the sleeping giant of racial memory until the past lives in the present" (50). Womack argues that "blood memory" also plays a part in the way tribal members hear and interpret the literature of their tribes, asserting that "the idea has to do with the way narrative shapes communal consciousness: through imagination⁵ and storytelling, people in oral cultures re-experience history" (26).

Momaday discusses these internal changes which take place in both teller/writer and listener/reader in an interview about storytelling:

When the storyteller tells his listener a story, he creates his listener, he creates a story. He creates himself in the process... The audience, in order to realize the experience to its fullest, must allow itself to be determined by the storyteller. He creates the situation. He creates the audience.... The listener who comes into a storytelling situation must allow himself to be created, changed. He must become another personality for the sake of the experience itself. Same thing can be said of the storyteller (qtd. in Givens 81).

Schubnell and Wilson consider how the structure of *WRM* reflects Momaday's role as listener/creator by examining how Momaday places himself in relation to the Kiowa stories, both oral and historical/ethnographic. Schubnell writes of the structure, "While the associative links [of the triads] create a sense of unity, the separation of each individual voice – set off by differing typefaces – suggests Momaday's distance from the mythical and historical experience of his ancestors. Only in his creative imagination, and through an associative process, can this distance be overcome" (157). Wilson writes that the "tripartite scheme allows Momaday to place in the same rhetorical space three sometimes closely related, sometimes disparate discourses into a larger, unified narrative

⁵ Here "imagination" refers to that of the person listening to the story being told as well as that of the teller.

(metanarrative) – the migration of the Kiowa people from Montana to Oklahoma, and Momaday's own understanding of himself as an Indian"⁶ (140). Wilson sees the "interpreter" of this metanarrative as Momaday's "self," which "becomes a linguistic center or site within the larger center of the history and culture of the tribe, or a circle within a larger circle" (141).

Blaeser suggests that the structure of *WRM* creates an opportunity for the reader to actively engage in the kind of creation that Momaday says is at the center of storytelling for both the listener and the teller. In performing the text this way, the reader creates for him/herself the "associative links" (Schubnell 157), which merge to form an understanding of Momaday's Kiowa identity – a creation which Momaday, as subject of *WRM*, also experiences. Specifically, Blaeser writes, the structure of *WRM* leads the reader to expect "some connection between the three [passages] because of their juxtaposition ...[and anticipate] some progression because of their arrangement. So he 'climbs aboard' the text to find the connections and the progression" (44-5), as Momaday does when he hears and reads the Kiowa stories and historical/ethnographic information. Within this "modeling," the autobiographical passages tell the story of how Momaday *listens*, and in doing so, they allow the reader to experience Momaday's own progression through hearing, interpretation, experience, and internalization of the stories he is told and reads about his tribe.

As Blaeser's reading suggests, *WRM* is in many ways a book about how interpretation of oral and written stories forms identity. This idea of interpretation as a means of strengthening and passing on tribal identity foreshadows Warrior and Womack's arguments for AILN interpretation. Momaday, educated in canonical literary interpretation and familiar with the cultures of various Native tribes as well as American society, responds in the autobiographical passages to Kiowa stories, and historical commentary on Kiowa stories, as an individual *Kiowa* – not as an educated American, not as an "Indian." In each of the twenty-four triads, Momaday presents interpretation of stories told to him as a Kiowa, or about his tribe: In the oral tradition passage, he transcribes oral language to written (*listening*). In the historical/ethnographic passage, he chooses an outside translation or bit of information which he sees as connected with the oral story, and which he has found in his own research outside the oral tradition of his family and tribe (*interpretation*). In the autobiographical passage, he responds to the subject of the other two passages from his own lived experience as a Kiowa (*internalization*). This movement from listening to interpretation to internalization is the same movement which Womack offers as a means of interpreting one's own tribal literature.

In sequentially reading the autobiographical passages of *WRM*, Blaeser notes an increasing authority in the narrative voice (49), suggesting that Momaday the listener is beginning to move from hearing and interpreting to, finally, internalizing the stories as part of his personal, lived experience. One triad which illustrates this progression toward internalization is Sections XIII, the story of the arrowmaker.

⁶ I disagree with Wilson's use of "Indian" here as I (along with many others) see *WRM* as a meditation on Momaday's Kiowa, rather than pan-Indian, identity.

The story of the arrowmaker is the most oft-cited segment of *WRM*, and Warrior writes that “the arrowmaker has become central to the Momaday canon, a necessary stopping place in situating his relationship to language, literature and the natural world” (171). Wilson writes that, “just as the arrowmaker determines his relationship to the outside observer, so does *WRM* explore the relationships among the different languages – the personal, the historical, and the oral” (142). I suggest that the story of the arrowmaker also reflects the relationship of Momaday as author of *WRM* to his tribe, and the relationship of the reader to *WRM*. In doing so, it illustrates the ultimate goal of AILN, as well as what happens if Native readers stop hearing their tribal stories apart from the intellectual (critical?) traditions of their tribes.

In the oral legend which begins the triad, an arrowmaker notices a stranger outside his tipi. He tells his wife to speak normally, as if everything is as usual, and he says, in Kiowa, “I know that you are there on the outside, for I can feel your eyes upon me. If you are Kiowa, you will understand what I am saying, and you will speak your name” (46). The enemy does not understand the arrowmaker’s words, or at any rate does not respond – so the arrowmaker, who has been stretching the arrow in the bow in all directions as if he is testing it, shoots, and “the arrow went straight to the enemy’s heart” (46). The historical/ethnographic passage on the facing page is short:

The old men were the best arrowmakers, for they could bring time and patience to their craft. The young men – the fighters and hunters – were willing to pay a high price for arrows that were well made (47)

It is followed by an autobiographical passage in which Momaday writes that his father used to tell him about an old arrowmaker named Cheney who used to visit Momaday’s grandfather. Although Momaday was born many years after Cheney had died, he pictures Cheney praying in the morning, moving from hearing, to imagination, to observation, to experience, thus:

...Every morning, my father tells me, Cheney would paint his wrinkled face, go out, and pray aloud to the rising sun. In my mind I can see that man as if he were there now. I like to watch him as he makes his prayer. I know where he stands and where his voice goes on the rolling grasses and where the sun comes up on the land. There, at dawn, you can feel the silence. It is cold and clear and deep like water. It takes hold of you and will not let you go (47).

The arrowmaker story is about revealing identity through understanding of pure language without the addition of tone and physical expression, which makes it particularly appropriate for examining a reader’s response to this story and *WRM* in general, since a reader does not hear the tone of voice or see the movement of a storyteller, nor read the historical passages in context. When Momaday tells about his relationship to Cheney, he places himself – and then, the reader – in the role of each character in the story. Finally, the story becomes a metaphor for Momaday’s experience of researching his Kiowa heritage, and for the reader’s experience of reading *WRM*.

First, when he hears his father talk about Cheney, Momaday is the stranger at the tipi. At this point, he recognizes that he is hearing about something he has not seen – he is distant from Cheney and the life that Cheney knows. But, as he imagines what Cheney would look and sound like, Momaday begins to move into the role of the wife, hearing not only his father's literal words, but the meaning behind them – that is, he realizes that when his father shares the memory of Cheney, he is not just sharing information about an arrowmaker, but sharing Cheney himself, and Cheney's experience. In the historical passage, elderly men – like Cheney – make the best arrows, and young men prize them. The figurative arrow, in this case, is the story: the stories old people tell, and the stories of their lives, which confer tribal identity on the young members of the tribe, like Momaday. In the autobiographical passage, which shows Momaday moving from hearing to understanding to experiencing Cheney's life, Momaday answers the arrowmaker with his Kiowa identity, saving himself from being labeled an outsider (enemy) by his own tribe. Furthermore, the autobiographical passage shows Momaday's movement to internalization of Cheney's experience. At this point, Momaday moves to the role of the arrowmaker, presenting the "ordinary" language of transcription, history and autobiography, as a challenge to his readers, who are then placed in the position of the outsider looking into the tipi, hearing a voice which calls upon them to answer if they understand.

In the role of arrowmaker/storyteller, Momaday presents to his readers five types of writing (poetry, prose, oral transcription, historical/ethnographic writing and autobiography) as well as annotated artwork – all of the writing in standard, if poetic, English. Looking only at the words, the language is "ordinary." The arrowmaker's challenge to the enemy is the book's challenge to the reader: If the book's language is the arrowmaker's "ordinary" tone of voice, the book's structure is his embedded question to the man outside the tipi (reader).

Ideally, the reader will be able to respond to Momaday's challenge with his/her "name," – that is, his/her own identity. For a Kiowa reader, according to the theory of AILN, that would mean responding by answering the challenge with a Kiowa name and going on to become the arrowmaker/storyteller for the next generation, having heard, understood, and lived the stories Momaday shares, including Momaday's story of his own interpretation and internalization of the stories of his tribe. Momaday, in internalizing the Kiowa stories, has answered the arrowmaker and been admitted as tribesman rather than eliminated as outsider. In the same way, according to AILN reading, a Kiowa reader will use his lived experience of being Kiowa to understand what the stories of his tribe *mean*, rather than just what the words that compose them *say*, and in that way he/she can answer the arrowmaker's challenge. But where does an AILN reading leave non-Kiowa readers?

The arrowmaker's challenge specifies only one group of people who will understand his words: "If you are a *Kiowa*⁷, you will understand what I am saying, and you will speak your name" (46). It is important to note that Momaday – who is part Cherokee, was raised among other tribes, and speaks Navajo more fluently than Kiowa –

⁷ Italics are mine.

answers the challenge not as an “Indian” or an educated person but as a Kiowa. This book is not about his pan-Indian identity, nor about the history of his tribe, but about himself as a Kiowa, which makes it particularly appropriate as a model for AILN. According to the theory of AILN, Kiowa readers will come to *WRM* with lived experience of the symbols, stories, landscape, and tribal identity which make up its content. A Kiowa interpretation of this book would be invaluable for the tribe, as well as the wider literary community, but Momaday's personal multicultural background and his inclusion on non-Kiowa writing about Kiowas, rather than invalidating his authenticity, allows him to suggest the possibility of “outsiders” answering the arrowmaker's challenge.

Womack contends that tribal members have a perspective on their own literature, which cannot come from any other readers, but his call for tribal-based reading is not exclusionary. He does not seek to eliminate or invalidate non-tribal readers, but rather to add tribal interpretation as a viable, respected means of analyzing Native literature. While Kiowa readers may be able to answer the arrowmaker's challenge with the Kiowa name the arrowmaker expects, non-Kiowa readers who read *WRM* in the interactive way that Blaeser suggests may at least realize that the challenge is occurring and be able to respond, even if they must respond with a name unfamiliar to the Kiowa arrowmaker.

The important thing for non-Kiowa readers of *WRM* (or non-Native readers of any Native text) to understand is that they, too, interact with the text, even as a cultural outsider. The arrowmaker makes his challenge to *whomever* is outside. While the inclusion of the historical/ethnographic passages reminds Native readers that they can and should read and respond to what is written about their tribes, these passages may suggest something else to non-Native readers. A non-Native reader unfamiliar with contemporary Native culture might look to the historical/ethnographic genres as the most familiar in which to read about Native people. By performing the text as Blaeser suggests, the historical passage begins to take a less authoritative role, allowing the non-Native reader to move beyond a perception of Native people as historical artifacts. I do not suggest that non-Native readers then experience identification with the Kiowa culture, but that they experience the *real-ization* of current Native culture; Native people cease being part of history and become individuals living *today*.

In a similar way, when non-Native readers witness Momaday responding not just to the stories of his own tribe but to non-Native historical/ethnographic accounts, they are reminded (and often happily surprised to find out) that Native people are not vanished victims of history. By interacting with this text to place historical writing within Momaday's theory of language as creator of identity, both non-Native and Native readers confront the problem of reading Native literature as that of conquered, silent people. Native readers are shown a way to hear and respond to the written history of their tribes. Non-native readers are presented with contemporary Native voices responding to the history, which for many readers is their only interaction with Native people. Only at this point, when both realize that the other's voice is speaking on the same topic, can Natives and non-Natives actually be in conversation.

If the interactive structure of *WRM* suggests a way that both non-Native and Native readers can understand the arrowmaker's challenge, AILN also holds possibility for non-Native critics. Just as the autobiographical passages show non-Native readers a contemporary Native voice responding to Native stories/history, so does AILN place Native voices into the critical conversation. Native voices responding from their own experience and knowledge of tribal culture reveal the current relevance of the symbols, ways of hearing, and even genres of Native literature in the same way that Momaday's autobiographical passages move the oral and historical passages from the realm of artifact to a living, relevant storytelling/intellectual tradition.

The interpretative quality of *WRM*, rather than placing Momaday among the assimilated, instead places him in the oral/literary tradition of his tribe. In using autobiographical passages to comment on and add to oral and historical tradition, Momaday models the interpretative use of autobiography that AILN suggests is at the heart of Native intellectual tradition.

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