Kiowa identity, personal identity: form and creation in n. scott momaday’s the wa...

N. Scott Momaday’s The Way to Rainy Mountain narrates the creation and history of the Kiowa tribe through three distinct voices, each separated by a different font and position on the page. The fragmented nature of this structure reveals Momaday’s struggle to reconcile the ancestral, historical, and personal facets of his cultural identity. And though this form presents his identity as a tug-of-war between three voices, he unifies them with common themes and images, displaying the transcendental power of language and oral tradition. Thus, The Way to Rainy Mountain not only discusses the creation of the Kiowa tribe in general, but the creation of Momaday’s own identity.

The form in The Way to Rainy Mountain alludes to Momaday’s internal struggle with his cultural identity. Momaday’s life has no overlap with the prime years of the Kiowa tribe, so he relies on two other voices—his father and the voice of history, to get information on the history and legends of his people. Not only does each voice have its own distinctive visual aesthetic, each has its own narrative, even within the same numbered section. In section IV for example, the ancestral voice tells the story of a child kidnapped by the sun and “ borne into the sky” (22). In the same section, the voice of history describes mountains that “ ascend into the sky” (23). Lastly, Momaday’s personal voice recounts walking through the meadows in the mountains where “ the uppermost branches of the tree seemed very slowly to ride across the blue sky” (23). Although these three narratives share common images and language in their descriptions of the sky (something I’ll get to later), their actual stories are distinct enough to produce a sense of disconnect and fragmentation. And Momaday’s

representation of his cultural identity as such—something fragmented and confusing—speaks volumes about his struggle with it.

As noted before, however, each section in The Way to Rainy Mountain is connected with similar language, themes, or images, often times in a way that shows the power of words and language. For example, section I recounts the story of the Kiowa's creation into the world through a log. The ancestral and historical voices both note the linguistic significance of the name Kwuda, meaning " coming out" (17). Momaday's personal voice, however, says nothing directly related to the creation of the Kiowa tribe, instead recounting a memory of " coming out upon the Northern Great Plains in the late spring" (17). At first glance, this instance of the phrase " coming out" in the personal voice could seem as a meager attempt to link Momaday's own life to the creation of his tribe. However, considering the term " coming out" as having cosmological implications, Momaday could be referring to the creation of his own identity, with his journey to Rainy Mountain representing his journey toward cultural understanding. As he comes upon Rainy Mountain, the center of Kiowa identity, he thinks " now I see the earth as it really is; never again will I see things as I saw them yesterday or the day before" (17). To Momaday, " the way to Rainy Mountain is preeminently the history of an idea, man's idea of himself, and it has old and essential being in language" (4). Furthermore, Momaday's interpretation of Kiowa legend in his own life showcases the timelessness of Kiowa oral tradition and language, and the importance of Kiowa lore in Momaday's own life and identity.

The links between ancestral, historical, and personal voice continue throughout The Way to Rainy Mountain. In section III, the ancestral voice explains how before they had horses “ the Kiowa’s had needs of dogs,” while the historical voice describes dogs as “ primordial” to the Kiowa tribe (20, 21). Momaday’s personal voice, however, remembers the dogs in his grandmother’s house and the feeling that they “ belonged there in a sense that the word ‘ ownership’ does not include” (21). In section VI, the ancestral voice tells the story of a spider, called a grandmother, taking care of the sun’s child. The historical voice recounts a time when the Kiowas were driven south by United States troops. At their campsite, it rained so hard that “ the earth was suddenly crawling with spiders, great black tarantulas, swarming on the flood” (27). Lastly, Momaday’s personal voice describes the spiders seen on the road to Rainy Mountain which he describes as “ very old” seeming, “ covered with long dusty hairs” and “ crotchety,” much like the way somebody would describe an elderly person like the grandmother in the ancestral legend. Again, Momaday’s personal connections to Kiowa history and legends show his acknowledgement of his culture and its affect on his identity and personhood.

There are several instances where Momaday explicitly lays out the importance of language and oral tradition in his life. In section VIII, the ancestral voice tells a story about a pair of twins who escape smoke suffocation by using a phrase their grandmother taught them: “ thain-mom,” meaning “ above my eyes” (33). In his own voice, Momaday remembers his grandmother, Aho, using a phrase in the Kiowa language in conjunction with bad events or thoughts as a “ warding off, an exertion of language upon

ignorance and disorder” (33). Similarly, the legend in section XIII tells the story of an arrowmaker who protects himself from danger using the Kiowa language. When he notices somebody outside his tipi, he announces “ I know that you are there on the outside, for I can feel your eyes upon me. If you are a Kiowa, you will understand what I am saying, and you will speak your name” (46). Without a response from the stranger, the Kiowa man shoots him dead. In a final example, section XIV, the ancestral voice explains how the Kiowa’s tamed extreme winds and tornados with their voice. It explains, “ The Kiowa language is hard to understand, but, you know, the storm spirit understands it (48). These instances show the power of words and language, by equating language with safety for the Kiowa people, especially within their own community. To the Kiowa’s “ A words has power in and of itself . . . it gives origin to all things” (33). Momaday’s acknowledgement of this, especially since he himself doesn’t speak Kiowa, gives even more power to the words of his culture.

The Way to Rainy Mountain’s fixation on Kiowa oral tradition is even rooted in its structural form. The first and foundational “ voice” of Momaday’s identity is the ancestral voice; the voice of oral tradition in the form of Momaday’s father. Commonly, this is also the longest voice, and the only voice which gets its own page. Therefore, each section in The Way to Rainy Mountain is almost overbore with the lore of the Kiowa people, and each subsequent voice is read in relation to the ancestral. Perhaps much like the way Momaday relates every aspect of his own life and his own identity to the legends he was told as a child. And though Momaday knows that the decline of his tribe has made the oral tradition suffer, he recognizes that the idea

remains; “ that is the miracle” (4). Oral tradition “ exists in the dimension of timelessness,” and helps shape Momaday’s multi-faceted identity.

N. Scott Momaday’s The Way to Rainy Mountain reads as a fragmented collection of legends and creation stories from the Kiowa culture. Perhaps more interesting than the lore, however, is Momaday’s journey toward a single, multi-faceted identity, rather than the three distinct “ voices” or identities presented through the form of the novel. Momaday’s unification of these voices using images and language exhibits the power of words and oral tradition, their significance to the Kiowa tribe and, more importantly, their significance to the creation of Momaday’s personal identity. Though Momaday has no part in the history of the tribe, the oral tradition binds him to it. His life and identity are shaped by these stories. Momaday’s journey to Rainy Mountain is “ an evocation of three things in particular: a landscape that is incomparable, a time that is gone forever, and the human spirit, which endures” (4).