

N. Scott Momaday's Double Consciousness: Fragmented Identity in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*

In *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969), N. Scott Momaday recounts that his grandmother witnessed the last Sun Dance of the Kiowa people: "She was about seven when the last Kiowa Sun Dance was held in 1887 on the Washita River above Rainy Mountain Creek" (Momaday 14). Although not explicitly stated in the text, the "last Kiowa Sun Dance" refers to the Bureau of Indian Affairs policy attempting to destroy Indigenous and Native customs, categorizing them as "Indian offences,^[1]" and then, assimilating the Kiowa people into white Western American society. Following this theme of the Kiowa's forced assimilation into Western American society, Momaday's text constructs issues of double consciousness that have plagued him. As a result of this double consciousness, Momaday exhibits a fragmented identity.

To explore issues of double consciousness in Momaday's work, it is important to note double consciousness as a theoretical lens proposed by W.E.B. DuBois. He writes: "It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others . . . two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings" (DuBois 846). DuBois writes about black experience decades after the Civil War as African Americans are denied an assimilation into white American society (Kent 93). Through this denial, African Americans viewed themselves "through the eyes of [white Americans]" as well as their own eyes, thus, leading to one experiencing double consciousness.

While DuBois notes double consciousness within the African American community, there is a lack of attention towards the First People's experience.^[2] DuBois overlooks Native Americans as a group of individuals being repressed by a white society, and thus, in some ways cannot experience double consciousness. However, this is not true. Specifically, Momaday

recounts moments in time when his identity is fragmented which I propose are moments of double consciousness.

One of the first moments of fragmented identity and double consciousness in Momaday's text is inability to speak Kiowa. Momaday writes: "The last time I saw her she prayed standing by the side of her bed at night . . . I do not speak Kiowa, and I never understood her prayers" (Momaday 14). Taking into consideration the historical assimilation of Native Americans, specifically the Kiowa tribe, by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Momaday is incapable of understanding Kiowa because he is a product of the white American school system that has taught him to repress his linguistic culture and heritage. Being forced into the American school system and condemning the use of the Kiowa language has fragmented Momaday's identity. While he is of Kiowa descent, the inability to understand the language creates a sense of alienation from his own Kiowa identity; while he is not white, he still adopts ideology that views the Kiowa as less and vice versa, thus, leading to double consciousness.

This alienation from his Kiowa identity continues throughout the text and Momaday remains in this fragmented state of identity. Momaday recounts: "Once I went with my father and grandmother to see the Tai-me bundle. It was suspended by means of a strip of ticking from the fork of a small ceremonial tree . . . I had never come into the presence of Tai-me before - nor have I have since" (Momaday 40). In this passage, Momaday underscores his experience of witnessing the Tai-me bundle which is used in the Kiowa Sun Dance as a ceremonial tool. Yet this Tai-me bundle is not used for practice rather it becomes an artifact "suspended by means of a strip" depreciating ceremonial value. Much like Momaday mentions his grandmother witnessing the last Sun dance, he is not able to witness the Tai-me bundle in action because of the legislation put forth by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Once again, Momaday is viewing the Tai-me bundle through the

eyes of the white society that restricts him from expressing his Kiowa identity, culture, and heritage.

Although the Kiowa tribe and Momaday were expected to assimilate into white American society, Momaday resists this assimilation. Because this assimilation is retrogressive and innately requires the Kiowa people to view themselves as less than in comparison to a white American society Momaday ultimately refuses this expectation and instead creates space for both identities to exist. While he resists, it is through this comparison that Momaday experiences double consciousness. As a result of this double consciousness, Momaday experiences a fragmented identity that he works to mend with the (re)establishment of history, culture, and heritage of the Kiowa tribe in *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (re)establishing his own Kiowa identity.

[1] See Benjamin R. Kracht's "Kiowa Powwows: Continuity in Ritual Practice." pp. 326

[2] See Steven Conn's *History's Shadow: Native Americans and Historical Consciousness in the Nineteenth Century*. pp. 2