

Momaday, Modernism and *The Way to Rainy Mountain*

N. Scott Momaday has long been heralded as one of the great Native American writers of the twentieth century. Producing seminal works such as *House Made of Dawn* and *The Way To Rainy Mountain* and many poems, essays, and even artwork, Momaday made his name in the literary world. However, there has been much argument over whether or not Momaday is a “modernist” or in some other category. Robert Dale Parker, a modernist scholar and an American Indian literature scholar, argues in his essay “Modernist Literary Studies and the Aesthetics of American Indian Literatures” that there is no space in modernity independent of indigeneity. There is only a space of not knowing you address indigeneity, and therefore mucking things up.” In the past, modernist discourse has had a habit of “mucking things up” when looking at N. Scott Momaday’s works as they often situate him solely in the American Indian Literature discourse (as if an author cannot be both Native American and a modernist). This characterizes the This essay seeks to situate Momaday and specifically *The Way to Rainy Mountain* in the modernist discourse through not only the recursiveness of indigeneity and modernism¹, but also the modernist aesthetics of *The Way To Rainy Mountain*.

The first (and perhaps the most glaringly obvious) modernist aesthetic that Momaday works with in *The Way To Rainy Mountain* is the non-linearity of the text. Parker highlights this as a parallel between American Indian literary studies and modernism, and Michael Tavel Clarke also points out this connection between Momaday’s “...structure of voices representing legend, history, and autobiography” and modernism’s “formal experimentation” in his essay “The New Modernist Studies, Anthropology, and N. Scott Momaday’s *The Way To Rainy Mountain*”(390). Clarke is looking specifically at the structure and connecting it with modernist experimentation,

¹ The recursiveness of indigeneity and modernism is discussed in the companion essay “[Digital Humanities/Digital Humanities Responsibility to Indigeneity](#)”

and this nonlinearity is characteristic of modernist attempts to show the subjective experience (Clarke 390, 391). Momaday's experimentation with the linear (switching between origin stories, his father's voice, and his own voice) creates a work that fits within not only the modernist understanding of non-linearity as an aesthetic experience but also within the American Indian literary tradition. This parallel should not be ignored, nor does it need to be reduced to just one or the other. Instead, seeing this intersectionality allows Momaday's text to be a connection for both traditions.

While the non-linearity of the text creates a space for *The Way To Rainy Mountain* within modernist discourse, the text also works to "make it new" in the language of Ezra Pound, and take the oral origin stories of the Kiowa people and make them new as they are written. Parker notes this with Momaday's first novel *House Made of Dawn* noting that this "...field-defining first and most acclaimed novels in a contemporary recovery of ancient, orally-transmitted myth conspicuously *written* and *new* in a modernist form..." (Parker). However, Parker does not mention *The Way to Rainy Mountain* though this text arguably does the same as well as mixing genres to create something "new" and different from the novel. By taking these origin stories and writing them down in his text (also in a sense "annotating" them with his own and his father's experience as Kiowa men) Momaday creates something new from what was old, breaking from tradition while also keeping it alive, blending the two together.

While this essay attempts to situate Momaday and specifically *The Way To Rainy Mountain* as a modernist/modernist text, this is not to, as Parker says, "discover' Native literatures for modernist studies...nor to reduce Native literature for modernist studies to...information retrieval". We also must resist what James H. Cox describes as "...the implication that designating Native American literary productions as modernist amplifies their literary value" (270). Momaday's work

is literary without the designation of “modernist”. However, this is an opportunity to see how an author can be both Native American and work within that tradition...and also be working within the modernist discourse. This again, is an opportunity to expand and make a more intersectional field. ²

² [“Digital Humanities/Digital Humanities Responsibility to Indigeneity”](#)

Works Cited

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