N. SCOTT MOMADAY'S HOUSE MADE OF DAWN: THE CRUCIAL "SILENCING" IN THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

By

MARLYS CERVANTES

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Thesis Approved:

Eric G. Anderson
Thesis Advisor

Susan Garza

[illegible]

[illegible]
Dean of the Graduate College

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SECTION I

INTRODUCTION

"We are what we imagine. Our very existence consists in our imagination of ourselves." --N. Scott Momaday

The role of the storyteller in most oral traditions is to entertain, educate, moralize, inform: a multitude of tasks. From the stories about their own cultures, people may derive their own self-images, or, in effect, use these stories to help themselves establish their own identities as individuals and as members of a community. In order for the stories to serve this purpose, however, the storyteller must provide his audience with sufficient time to contemplate; these moments are silent, the times when the listener digests the feast offered up by the narrator's words. Anna Lee Walters, a Pawnee/Otoe poet, essayist, and novelist, describes the connection between speech and silence in her essay, "The Spoken Word is Revered." Walters tells us that after each of the clans at a gathering spoke,

> Silence followed. *Silence*. Then all the totem beings spoke at once. Yes, through their speeches and voices, and through the ensuing silence, the people, the clans, knew they lived. This is the

power of language, but often it is not realized until silence prevails. Silence. *Remember both, we are told.* (79)

Silence serves as the locus for recollection, for the contemplation of words' meaning, which is one of the sources of their power. The very fact that Walters chooses to write about both the spoken word and silence indicates the connection which she recognizes between the two.

Kiowa author N. Scott Momaday and many other contemporary Native American authors, such as Sherman Alexie and Louise Erdrich, develop characters who demonstrate the overwhelming power of words, especially the way in which control of these words relates to the characters as they strive to maintain or create personal identities and connections to their cultures. Although numerous scholars and critics focus on Momaday's assertions regarding the power of words, very few delve even superficially into his use of silence, leaving a void which cannot be overlooked. The juxtaposition of language and silence, within a narrative form and within the life of a person, creates an opposition so vital to the narrative that the two serve as a yin and yang: without silence, words would lose their power. And, although many Native American authors tend to find a great need for and power in silence, scholars also tend to neglect any exploration into the element of risk

that such silence lends to the lives of contemporary Native Americans,[1] as well as come to different conclusions from this thesis regarding the necessity of a personal self-discovery before a connection to a tribal identity occurs. If the element of silence is overlooked, one may easily miss the process of self-discovery as essential in leading to unity with a person's tribe.

The conflict between personal will and community need is as old as humanity. Such a struggle--self-identity versus communal perception--requires the individual who wishes to do more than simply survive or be more than simply a member of a larger whole to find ways in which to reconcile the two selves. In numerous contemporary Native texts, protagonists who either are alienated from their tribal communities or who are merging into "white" society while distancing themselves from their Native communities, whether by their own choices or not, are the individuals who feel that struggle. It is interesting that throughout Momaday's own life, possibly due to his alternately living on reservations and in white communities, he has been successful in this reconciliation. For him, the communal perception includes the self. However, this inclusion is not the case for many of his characters as well as many contemporary Native Americans. This problem of duality led to the structural movement of my thesis. Sections II, III, and IV each move from the positive to the negative, or the

risky, aspects of language, memory, and silence. The complexities, the balancing acts, are very similar to the ones which Native Americans, including Native writers, deal with in society today. An assimilation into society's mainstream would be considered a "move up" in society's hierarchy by the majority of society; it would lead to more overall power in society. However, it is quite possible that, for many Native Americans, too much of their Native "persons" would be lost with the move.

Likewise, the move from oral to written narratives involves similar dualities. A move from oral to written preserves stories which may, otherwise, be lost. However, there is concern that written prose is not an adequate method of interpretation for the oral tradition, while other written forms such as a more poetic expression might, at least, be somewhat appropriate as a means of interpretation. There are "charges made by Dennis Tedlock and Dell Hymes that the traditional prose paragraph is an inadequate means of written representation for Indian texts" (Mattina 129). However, I would argue that if critics continue to locate Indians only within the oral tradition, or even limit the forms of writing considered "appropriate," they are, in fact, relegating Native authors to the past and, as a result, once again rendering Natives invisible and Native voices silent in the present. The concern over appropriate translations of oral texts has led to linguists such as

Tedlock working to translate such texts without losing the nuance, intonations and pauses found within the oral representations. Tedlock provides readers with a "performance-oriented text,"[2] a system of symbols to indicate the subtleties of the narrative. Although a seemingly daunting task, it is not unheard of in other contexts, such as in script writing for theatrical productions or in the scoring of music. Therefore, Tedlock can be said to provide his readers with a narrative "song," providing the appropriate points for crescendo, allegro, staccato, rests and holds. This type of effort may well be one of the best avenues for preservation of the oral tradition.

Responses to this move from oral to written narratives continue to be at the forefront of any discussion of Native texts, and Momaday and his works continue to be an integral part of the dialogue. In a 1990 interview with Laura Coltelli, Momaday himself best sums up the idea that writing "springs in a natural way from the oral tradition": "I think that the two traditions are probably more apparently different than they are really different one from another . . . they are probably closer together than we realize" (93). Momaday's use of "probably" certainly stresses the ambiguity of the issue; however, the fact that a master storyteller such as Momaday views writing as an avenue to express his ideas, his Native heritage, lends a certain

validity to the assertion that both methods provide power to the words. Momaday explains:

> The verbal tradition by which it [man's idea of himself through language] has been preserved has suffered a deterioration in time. What remains is fragmentary: mythology, legend, lore, and hearsay--and of course the idea itself, as crucial and complete as it ever was. That is the miracle. (Rainy Mountain 4)

Momaday's 1968 novel House Made of Dawn captured the literary world and began what is now known as the Native American Renaissance.[3] Critics agree that with this Pulitzer-Prize winning novel, Native American literature moved center stage as a topic for critical debate. Numerous authors followed Momaday's lead, and readers and critics were provided ample opportunities for review of the texts and the Native cultures.

Momaday is one member of contemporary Native American traditions whose works frequently explore the tension between speech and silence; House Made of Dawn, the most important primary text covered in this study, turns this tension into social commentary and a source of conflict for more than one character. This thesis concludes that, in the novel, Momaday exemplifies the opposition of sound and silence by making the times his characters choose to be silent just as important as when they choose to speak.

However, choice is the key; if an individual is forced to be silent or is incapable of speaking, he or she has lost power. Control over such words and/or silences directly relates to an individual's or character's ability to maintain or create an identity. In House Made of Dawn, through his juxtaposition of sound and silence, Momaday emphasizes feeling and numbness, articulation and inarticulation. And, found within the walls of silence and memory is personal identity. The study further concludes that Momaday's text emphasizes that self-discovery is necessary before a reconciliation can occur between a person and his or her tribal identity. If we consider the tribal culture as a tree, the individual serves as one of the roots rather than a branch (which, for this study's purposes, will be considered elements of that culture). The root system grows and expands over time, and some of the roots die; however, if enough remain alive to sustain it, the tree continues to thrive. Likewise, the tribal community thrives as long as enough individuals discover their places within the society to sustain its culture. Although Native individuals may actually "be" members of these cultures by their very birthrights, it remains imperative for these Natives to accept and understand their roles within such communities to sustain their cultures. Therefore, the conclusion is that there is a necessary privileging of the individual journey to self-discovery in order to lead to an

SECTION II

THE POWER OF WORDS

The lives and words
of our ancestors
are part of the land,
lasting echoes, never gone.

They return to us
with each story, each song,
as old as the sun,
as new as each dawn.
--Joseph Bruchac
(Lasting Echoes 131.21-28)

Building Identities

Numerous Native American authors, including Sherman Alexie, Louise Erdrich and Susan Power, strongly convey a sense of the power of words through their prose and poetry, and N. Scott Momaday certainly has made this idea the foundation of his works. Other authors' fictional characters, like Momaday's, display in their dialogue and thoughts the tremendous creative and sustaining power inherent in words; Momaday, however, also fully incorporates this within his nonfictional work, which indicates that this power is not only important to his texts and to his fictional characters, by crucial to his own survival as well.

In a critical response to his 1989 interview with

Momaday, Charles L. Woodard explains the source of Momaday's beliefs regarding the importance of words: childhood stories. Among these stories, Woodard asserts, the one that remains of paramount importance to Momaday is that of the arrowmaker, "the man who saves himself through language" (2). Woodard notes:

> The arrowmaker is a man who dares to speak in a moment of crisis--a man who risks himself in words in order to overcome an enemy. The boy [Momaday] learned from that story the importance of applying words to the world. He would come to believe that humans are beings made of words and that he could realize himself, and communicate himself, through language. He would come to believe that he could create his world in words, and that through words he might even transcend time and have perpetual being. (2)

Momaday's essence of self, of a being "made of words" and the risk such creative power generates, developed as a result of the many stories of his ancestors, stories which often dealt with the great creative power of words, stories that Momaday relied on as he grew to manhood, as he built an identity, as he discovered and continually rediscovers himself. The author, unlike many of his characters and, I would suggest, many younger Natives, easily merges his tribal identity with his self-identity.

Momaday asserts that "language is the context of our experience. We know who we have been, who we are, and who we can be in the dimension of words, of language" (Man Made of Words 87). In an attempt to explain the Native writer's role in language's continuation, Kimberly M. Blaeser explains that author Gerald Vizenor

> acknowledges not only the primacy of the word but also its place in the relationships that constitute an oral tradition. Storytellers (and, by extension, writers) are merely vehicles or voices for the words that have always existed. (Gerald Vizenor 18)

Even pre-lingual communities must have used commonly understood gestures, a form of text, to present ideas to one another, so the move from oral to written narrative simply serves as another step in the evolution of the presentation of such ideas. Therefore, the words, the ideas, have the "perpetual being" described by Woodard and, as a result, I would suggest that the strength of such an endurance lies, perhaps, within the individuals who can use these words successfully to create and sustain themselves. In doing so, the Native individuals sustain the Native communities and cultures. Certainly, Momaday truly believes and lives his very understanding of language, of the great power in words. Blaeser, an Anishinaabe who was raised in reservation communities, stresses that Momaday has "spoken of words as

origins" more directly than any other writer (18). I would take Blaeser's assertion another step and claim that Momaday not only has spoken of this process directly, but has allowed his reader to see how he lives by the concept more fully than most writers, actually diminishing the line between his craft and his person as he brings to being his own vehicle to identity through his words. His words do not just create identity for fictional characters, but also for Momaday himself.

In The Way to Rainy Mountain, Momaday provides an example of this important avenue of origin: "A word has power in and of itself. It comes from nothing into sound and meaning; it gives origin to all things" (33). The strengths of words are creative, aboriginal, all-encompassing. Momaday provides an example of this in his novel, House Made of Dawn. Tosamah's grandmother understands the creative power of words. The grandmother "had learned that in words and in language, and there only, she could have whole consummate being" (94). Without words and language, she would not be. The words become a part of her self and they alone can make her whole.

Momaday's writings continually reflect either directly or indirectly on the wholeness to which language can lead the individual. Paying homage to this importance of words, Momaday writes,

> Language is the stuff of the imagination. The

> imagination is the creative aspect of language. It enables us to use language to its highest potential. It enables us to realize a reality beyond the ordinary, it enables us to create and to re-create ourselves in story and literature. It is the possible accomplishment of immortality. (Man Made of Words 2)

The above concept seems very Western, and may result from Momaday's own merging of his academic background with his Native culture; however, even if the idea stems from the tension between and/or merging of the two cultures, the idea of an individual immortality suggests a certain privilege which Momaday, at least, places on individual identity, rather than the more traditional privilege placed on the Indian community over that of the individual.

Momaday is not alone in his quest to show the reader of Native American literature the creative power found in words, in imagination. In The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven, Spokane/Coeur d'Alene author Sherman Alexie also stresses the creative power of the imagination:

> Imagination is the politics of dreams . . . . Imagine a song stronger than penicillin. Imagine a spring with water that mends broken bones. Imagine a drum which wraps itself around your heart. Imagine a story that puts wood in the fireplace. (152-53)

For Alexie, imagination is crucial to survival and, therefore, the most successful survivor is the one who has a creative imagination. He provides the following formula: "Survival = Anger x Imagination" (150). So, for Alexie, the power found in the expression of imagination, coupled with the passion of anger, truly creates and sustains. There can be no greater power than creation and no greater threat which would lead to anger than the threat against life.

Alexie's protagonist in Indian Killer utilizes his own imagination and anger in an attempt to talk himself into a life which he believes is his destiny. The novel begins with the story of a birth on an Indian reservation in the late nineteen sixties. John provides a vivid account in which a young mother, barely in her teens, gives birth on the dirty sheets in an Indian Health Service hospital. The birth is traumatic for the beautiful young Indian girl, and the infant is immediately whisked away in a helicopter to adoptive parents, a well-meaning white couple who, because they evidently want a white baby, name him John Smith, a name which is about as generically "white" as a person could possess. Although Alexie draws the reader in with the details of John's birth story, he also makes it clear that these are John's imaginings, expressions of his desire to be wanted by his birth family and of his attempt to construct a lost identity and heritage through his words: "When John imagines his birth, his mother is sometimes Navajo. Other

times she is Lakota. Often, she is from the same tribe as the last Indian woman he has seen on television" (4). John feels compelled to create a past--to give birth to a mother, so to speak--through his words; although the account is vividly detailed and emotionally moving, he cannot actually remember the "history." Still, because his isolation from his culture proves too difficult for him to cope with, John Smith needs to create an identity, an Indian identity, for himself. Alexie puts in motion this overarching use of language and imagination to create a mother and provide this connection.

However, Alexie also takes the power of language a different direction by allowing the creations of other authors to thrive once again within the pages of his own writings. When Daniel (the adoptive father of John Smith) searches for John, he speaks to an Indian man about homeless men the Indian has seen. Among the characters from other Native American novels mentioned in the conversation between the Indian man and Daniel is "Abel, the Kiowa" (220). By including this character, whether in jest or seriousness, Alexie allows the life Momaday previously breathed into the character Abel to carry on past the borders of House Made of Dawn. In doing so, Alexie provides a new home and continued vitality to the "homeless" Abel within the borders of a different text, beautifully sustaining the life Momaday previously created.

Despite language's beauty, though, there remains a risk in creating an identity through stories, through language. In Indian Killer, Alexie's John Smith makes up his own stories, but other, possibly innate, stories try to get through to him: "John could remember when it first happened, this noise in his head. He was young, maybe ten years old, when he heard strange music" (23). John cannot understand the noise which forces itself into his mind; he cannot merge his "true" identity with the one he is living. Indicating this same sensation of an inability to belong in White culture, Calvin Martin explains that "so long as [the Indian] subscribes to the promptings and messages of the mythic world of his ancestors he remains a misfit in [the white world]" (31). Alexie's John Smith represents a portion of the very problem discussed by Martin. Although Smith does not "subscribe" to the mysticism of his Native heritage because he does not possess the knowledge to make a connection to his tribal identity, he still feels and hears the "messages" from that identity but cannot understand them. Smith desires to grasp the world of his ancestors, but cannot because he does not possess the skills, whether in actuality or only in his mind, necessary to make the connection. As a result, the meaning of the sounds of a distant past eludes him. The sound was like "clear and precise" voices, yet he could not understand it, something John knew he could do "if he were a real Indian" (24).

However, after being raised by the white couple, John feels that he is not "real."

The problem of John's failure to belong to any world, Indian or white, can be further explained by Peter Nabokov, who discovered the problem during interviews with elderly Native Americans as he researched an anthology on Indian and white relations. Nabokov suggests that one "who swims between cultures can get stranded from either shore" (151), which is the dilemma facing John in his attempt to create an identity: instead of his creation becoming a safe haven for him or helping establish a sense of peace, it leads him to doubt his very heritage. John is "stranded" from both worlds, even though others have tried to help him fit into one world or the other. His words early in the novel, his own creation of an identity, are too much because they are not true and it is too late to take them back.

Sustaining Life

Self-creation is not the only object of language's power in Native American texts; self-sustenance, too, lends potency to words. An example of this appears in Tracks, in which Chippewa author Louise Erdrich expresses a theme of life through words. Erdrich allows words both to convince Nanapush of his vitality and ward off his very death. In the novel, Father Damien represents the white man's attempts to destroy or, at a minimum, alter the Chippewa way of life.

The need for the generative power of words becomes even more crucial in light of the threat of cultural annihilation posed by the imposition of white culture on the Indian individual. In regard to a conversation with Father Damien, Nanapush explains, "I talked both languages in streams that ran alongside each other, over every rock, around every obstacle. The sound of my own voice convinced me I was alive" (7). He must hear his voice to recognize his own existence. Because Nanapush needs to feel alive and in control, every time Father Damien begins to speak, Nanapush pushes "him under with [his] words" (7). Father Damien is a threat to Nanapush; as a result, the power in Nanapush's words finds physical and, sometimes, even violent expression, evidence of his attempt to remain "alive." He generates his own warrior-like verbal stamina, seemingly drowning the priest with his words. As long as Nanapush can talk, he has control--in fact, he has so much control that he can, literally, silence his enemy through the fluidity of language.

This concept of life sustained through words is more evident when Nanapush tells us about his close encounters with death: "I got well by talking. Death could not get a word in edgewise, grew discouraged, and traveled on" (46). Even death cannot prevail over Nanapush and his words: he possesses the ability to silence death. He may have lost some of his physical agility due to his age, but he can

still escape death through the agility of his words--his mental and linguistic agility.

Erdrich, through this power of words, allows the mind to construct the physical power in her novel. Nanapush exhibits another example of this control. Just as his words have the power to help him sustain his own life, he can also sustain others simply (or perhaps, not so simply) by beginning a story. After Lulu nearly freezes to death, Nanapush holds her close and, as soon as she looks up into his eyes, he knows he holds the power to heal her: "Once I had you I did not dare break the string between us and kept moving my lips, holding you motionless with talking" (167). If he can hold Lulu's attention with his story, hold her still and attentive, he can will her to survive. Nanapush keeps her in this world through his storytelling, refusing to stop telling the story until she heals. Again, Nanapush exhibits the stamina of a young healer, even though he himself is old, as he maintains control over Lulu until her healing is complete. He not only proves his ability to sustain himself through his words, but he can also ward off the death of those whom he loves through the power of his language. In a tradition rich with community, I would suggest that Erdrich privileges, although not quite as fully as Momaday, the individual over the Native American community. Although Nanapush, a trickster who certainly is centered within his Native community, saves another tribal

member, he clearly elevates his own personal strengths through the stories of his exploits involving both Lulu and Father Damien. At the same time that he "saves" a part of the tribe by saving an individual, an element of that whole, he boasts of his own accomplishments as personal achievements. In doing so, Nanapush exemplifies the importance of a person, a specific individual, to the tribe and its progress.

Risks of Sound

Along with this personal, life-giving quality of language, Erdrich also explores the risks within language. In the poem "Clouds," Erdrich emphasizes the risk surrounding words:

> It is too late, I fear, to call these things back.
> Not in this language.
> Not in this life. (Jacklight 42-44)

Whether or not a speaker comprehends the risk of misusing or abusing verbal power, the responsibility remains, and the words become part of the individual. Indeed, an utterance may be rendered an undesired part of future beings. Therefore, once uttered it exists. The words may harm individuals or cause them to be lost within their (the words') power. As a result, lost community members may stifle the progress of their communities.

Sometimes words and stories are simply too much, too

many. Even one of Erdrich's own storytellers, Nanapush, says that "talk is an old man's last vice" (46). This is one vice which becomes almost compulsion for Nanapush, who, when approached by Eli seeking help in winning Fleur's heart, tells the younger man story after story about his (Nanapush's) own past, especially his past loves. The old man realizes his stories about the past (which, since Eli wants Nanapush's assistance, he must listen to) go on and on, but he cannot stop the flow of words. Although he denies his own fault, Nanapush believes that stories can overwhelm a person: "I shouldn't have been caused to live so long, shown so much of death, had to squeeze so many stories in the corners of my brain" (46). Nanapush has too many words swirling in his mind; he is unable to forget any story: it continues to be a part of the person who hears it, and certainly a part of the storyteller who relates it. And, finally, when the many stories completely overwhelm Nanapush, they must be told--often told again and again. They must be passed on. The storyteller must strive to find the right words so that the stories' truths continue to live, to thrive, and to remain in his community's consciousness past the storyteller's own life.

Momaday's ideas give insight into the relationship between Nanapush and Eli. Momaday posits, "When he [the storyteller] spoke, he expected others to listen. He was making a claim upon their time, and that's a serious matter"

(qtd. in Woodard 100). Momaday explains that because earlier storytellers understood the power of words they, likewise, comprehended the speakers' obligation which comes with using these words:

> the nineteenth-century man in an oral tradition . . . knew quite well that when he opened his mouth he bore risks and responsibilities. He had to deal with words in a simple and direct and honest way. Words were powerful. They were not to be abused or misused. (qtd. in Woodard 100)

Although the storyteller has a great power through the words which he speaks, he must also accept complete accountability for any consequence from those words. Therefore, the storyteller must proceed with caution in the use of his words.

But for Nanapush, even his knowledge that the stories are too many cannot stop his relaying of the stories to Eli. Nanapush tells us, "I opened my mouth and wore out the boy's ears" (46). The stories all fit Eli's dilemma and, instead of relating just a few of his own stories, Nanapush is compelled to relate all of the stories which cloud his own mind. The power of the stories proves to be greater than his own power to control and shape his words. The stories take on a life of their own. Through the character Nanapush, Erdrich exemplifies this power of language over the strength of the individual will; she expresses the same

hierarchy of power in her poem "The Book of Water": "It was a whirl of rain and pages, a terrible amount of words" (Jacklight 13). As in the case of Nanapush, there can be too many words, there can be too many stories. I would suggest that the risk which Erdrich asserts and Nanapush discovers is the loss of self in the deluge of words, making self-discovery or rediscovery a necessity.

That words are not always positive, and that often an abundance of words is restrictive rather than helpful, is a recurring theme in Native American literature. In House Made of Dawn, Reverend Tosamah is the character who uses words excessively. When talking about the biblical John, Tosamah decides that "in his [John's] hurry he said too much" (92). Of John's contributions to his Bible, Tosamah says, "It was the Truth, all right, but it was more than the Truth. The Truth was overgrown with fat, and the fat was God" (92). Tosamah claims that because John elaborates on the Truth, he renders it invalid. Ironically, Tosamah becomes so wordy in his sermon that he finally does the same thing he criticizes John for; Tosamah moves completely out of the text of the Bible for his sermon, and his words obscure their own meaning. Yet, Momaday makes strong assertions through the character of Reverend Tosamah, especially when Tosamah speaks of his grandmother. Perhaps the most significant scene in the novel regarding words is Tosamah's juxtaposition of John's God, whose "fat" language

overwhelmed and hid the truth behind his words, and his own grandmother, who considers each story to be sacred and eternal. The elderly grandmother understands the sanctity of the word, the importance of avoiding excess in speaking, but her grandson cannot control his own misuse of words despite being able to see the ways in which others partake in such grandiose verbalization. The implication within both Erdrich's and Momaday's texts is that awareness of the problem of abusing and misusing words is not enough for an individual to control the problem. Momaday stresses this most significantly through his character Tosamah, while Erdrich stresses it through Nanapush. Even the well-meaning individual cannot always escape the negative power of words which comes with the misuse of language.

In The Grass Dancer, Susan Power provides another example of the well-intentioned person who does not truly recognize the power within language. In the novel, the white teacher Jeannette McVay implores her Indian students to share their stories with her and their classmates. She even seats them in a circle (because, of course, that is the Indian way) and tells them:

> I'd like to hear from everyone . . . . Each student in this room is the receptacle of ancient wisdom. I know it's there, in the deepest part of you. All the stories you've heard, prayers you've learned, customs you may take for granted. (60)

McVay desires to become a "receptacle of ancient wisdom" just as she fancies these young Indian students to be and, as a result, she proves her unworthiness through her failure to recognize there is truly a power within these stories.

In an attempt to appease their teacher, two of McVay's students, Frank Pipe and Charlene Thunder, tell inconsequential stories while, at the same time, remembering other, more important, stories. Even at the tender age of ten, these children understand the power in the stories and know the inappropriateness of sharing the stories in this manner, at this place. McVay, the outsider, privileges Native American ways of life, but her limitation is that she can only observe the reality of everyday life for these young Indians and, as a result, cannot understand the situation she herself creates for her students. However, Pipe and Thunder will not risk the consequences such misuse may cause by going against their knowledge of the power of their stories.

Also in The Grass Dancer, Power provides another character who, too late, realizes the power in her angry words. Expectant mother Lydia Wind Soldier's frustration leads her husband, Calvin, to take his son out for a ride to relieve Lydia's stress over the behavior of the boy. The car ride results in the death of both father and child. Although others in her community blame the accident on the drunk driver in the other vehicle, Lydia recognizes that it

was really her own angry words, the "terrible power" of her voice, which led to the deaths and, now, she decides, "I do not speak to the people around me. I won't unleash the killing voice, even to soothe my son, who is the only blessing" (196-97). Lydia chooses never to speak and only to occasionally sing from this moment in her life forward. She realizes the personal power of the spoken word too late to save her family and, as a result, vows to never let the same thing happen again. She now understands the risk, and no longer wants the responsibility which, along with this illustration from Power, Momaday assures us comes with the spoken word.

But the responsibility of the storyteller may well be much more substantial than even Power suggests. "For the storyteller," Momaday tells us, "language does indeed represent the only chance for survival. It is appropriate that he survives in our time and that he has survived over a period of untold generations" (12). Because the stories, the words, continue, the storyteller does not die, but rather continues to thrive through his narratives into new generations of people who hear them. The stories must go on to sustain this life. Momaday further notes that

> [w]e have no being beyond our stories. Our stories explain us, justify us, sustain us, humble us, and forgive us. And sometimes they injure and destroy us. Make no mistake, we are at risk in

> the presence of words . . . . It is better to enter into the danger of such a story than to keep safely away in a space where the imagination lies dormant. (169)

The words are capable of sustaining life for us; however, there may well be a risk associated with those very life-giving sounds. If the proper words can initiate such strong generative powers, then the misuse of such words can certainly lead to destruction and, as a result, remembering the powers such words unleash becomes crucial to survival.

SECTION III

THE BEAUTIFUL RISK OF MEMORY

"One finds oneself finally in
the shadow of memory."
--Susan L. Roberson
("Translocations and Transformations" 33)

Beautiful Memory

A certain beauty exists in the memories of others which, upon hearing them related, become one's own. Many of us have experienced the feeling of remembering stories from our infancy or childhood because they have been lovingly related to us by family members or older friends. As a result, we incorporate these 'memories' into our own beings. In The Grass Dancer, Susan Power relates how the process works from parent to child. In 1864, the young woman Red Dress thinks back to the stories told to her by her mother, Black Moon. Red Dress says, "Her memories of me became my own" (220). Black Moon passes on an extended identity to her own daughter through stories; Red Dress gains a greater sense of who she herself is--of her very own person.

In House Made of Dawn, Momaday also provides his readers with an excellent example of memory aiding in the establishment of identity when Abel recalls hearing the old men in the community as they pray:

> He remembered the prayer, and he knew what it meant--not the words, which he had never really heard, but the low sound itself, rising and falling far away in his mind, unmistakable and unbroken. (13)

Unlike the sound of the music and voices which Alexie's John Smith hears, Abel's sound is a comfort. Unlike John, Abel understands the "unmistakable" voices and allows these voices to become part of himself. Momaday calls this type of vivid recollection the "music of memory" (Man Made of Words 7). He tells his readers that "much of the power and magic and beauty of words consist not in meaning but in sound." This memory of sound establishes the great connection between feelings and words. Abel feels, rather than recognizes, the meaning of the words of the prayer.

Often it is the right choice of words, the right conversation, which brings a connectedness with the memories of the past. In Tracks, Nanapush tells of finding that sense of connection with Margaret during a conversation with her: "Our talk floated upward in the darkness, swirled around the past and present" (129). Their words, their memories, create a unity between the past and the present and, also, between Nanapush and Margaret--even though their past was not physically together. They share, though, a communal identity illustrated in their common stories and experiences. In Blaeser's book about Gerald Vizenor's views

on the oral tradition, she indicates how Vizenor's assertions that words have always existed implies that it is the "act of connection" that is crucial to the "recognition or discovery necessary for the creation that comes from verbalization" (18). Just as Nanapush and Margaret connect through the language of their shared memories, so all creation must stem from the actual verbalization of the eternal words which unite a people.

Vizenor, however, stops short of believing that the memories are actually carried innately within the person. Explaining his view more fully, Blaeser notes,

> Vizenor employs the term 'primal memory' (as opposed to the 'racial memory' N. Scott Momaday has spoken of), but he does feel that, because of embedded cultural tradition and beliefs, most Native Americans . . . have an 'established pattern of thinking.' (Gerald Vizenor 127)

For Vizenor, a person's knowledge is a matter of nurture, not nature. In a similar assertion, but one that takes Vizenor's ideas one step further, Paula Gunn Allen argues that the "artistry of the tribes is married to the essence of language itself, for through language one can share one's singular being with that of the community and know within oneself the communal knowledge of the tribe" (Sacred Hoop 55). Therefore, the individual must possess the tools, have the ceremony, to understand this "communal knowledge" and to

grasp his or her place within that tribal community. The language of the ceremony is needed to unite the individual with the tribal community and, as a result, individual personal experience is less important than tribal community once a person establishes his or her place within that culture. In his or her transformation, the

> protagonist wanders through a series of events that might have happened years before or that might not have happened to him or her personally, but that nevertheless have immediate bearing on the situation and the protagonist's understanding of it. (Allen Sacred Hoop 147)

Actual time and personal experience become much less important than the protagonist's ability to meld the memory, the feeling, with a greater sense of importance to his life and the life of his birth community. For Momaday, the individual character development is just the opposite of Vizenor's assertions and closer to those of Allen, since Momaday sees nature, an innate understanding, as providing the truest sense of self.

Expanding on his own concept of being, Momaday states that "the Indian has determined himself in his imagination over a period of untold generations. His racial memory is an essential part of his understanding" (qtd. in Blaeser "Work in Motion" 51). In the quotation, Momaday does not discuss a literary character, but rather a representative

contemporary American Indian. Often, Momaday's fictional characters live experiences which very closely represent actual experiences of his own which he has related in his nonfictional writings. Momaday's notion of "racial memory" has proved a source of great misgivings for many critics, such as Arnold Krupat and David Murray. Krupat goes so far as to claim that Momaday's idea is "absurd," stating that "there is no gene for perception, no such thing as memory in the blood" and, further, claiming that this aspect of Momaday's work places "unnecessary obstacles" in the way of understanding and appreciating Native American literature (Voice in the Margin 13). Although the concept may indeed place "obstacles" to a comfortable understanding of Native culture and literature, I would argue that this obstacle actually exists due to an inability to move out of a Euroamerican logic and open up to Native ideas.

Other critics take a different approach when considering Momaday's idea. Jace Weaver agrees, instead, with the ideas of H. David Brumble III who believes that Momaday's term "racial memory" is synonymous to and interchangeable with the term "culture." Weaver goes on to explain that the traditional Indian cannot forget the past "not because of some genetic determination but because its importance to heritage and identity are passed down through story from generation to generation" (7).[4] Craig S. Womack agrees with Weaver in his response to Krupat's argument:

> Momaday's oft misunderstood notion called 'racial memory,' which some critics have seemingly mistaken for racist memory . . . has to do with the way narrative shapes communal consciousness: through imagination and storytelling, people in oral cultures reexperience history. (26)

It would seem that critics either completely reject Momaday's idea or decide that he, in fact, must not actually mean what he says, which indirectly rejects the very same idea: he cannot mean that memory travels genetically from one generation to the next because that idea is simply not logical to Euroamerican thought process.

However, I would suggest that Momaday means exactly the idea which he poses. Momaday relates his own grandmother's memories as closely resembling those "racial memories" found in House Made of Dawn. The stories of Momaday's grandmother lead to his desire for a journey which ends up being pivotal to Momaday's own identity and essential to his ideas regarding the importance of memory. Blaeser explains Momaday's transformation from a traditional way of thinking to that which includes his ideas relating to "racial memory." Blaeser sees this change stemming directly from Momaday's actual journey to Rainy Mountain, noting that

> Momaday tells us in his introduction [to The Way to Rainy Mountain] that he undertook the journey because he wanted to 'see in reality' what his

> grandmother had seen 'in the mind's eye,' thus illustrating his acceptance of the distinction between reality and the imagination. (49)

As Blaeser further explains, we know that Momaday "distinguishes conventionally between death and life because he tells us that his grandmother has died and now he 'can have her only in memory'" (49). However, during his trip to Rainy Mountain, time collapses for Momaday and, as a result, his sense of reality is transformed into something much more traditional and organic. Blaeser asserts that it is now that Momaday "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). At this point, Momaday understands that an accepted self-identity leads to community connection.

Like Momaday himself, his House Made of Dawn characters provide suggestions of memory being passed on through blood. Tosamah relates a Romantic precept that children have "something like a reflection of all human experience" (95). Tosamah's grandmother also speaks specifically of children, stressing that this knowledge arrives at or even before birth. In an interesting move, she also does not limit her comment to Native experience, but rather states "all human experience," leading to the recollection of Christian biblical assertions that a person truly needs "childlike

faith" to understand the Truth which brings him or her to God and to eternal life. Tosamah's grandmother is a perfect example of her own suppositions regarding innate memory. Tosamah relates,

> Though she lived out her long life in the shadow of Rainy Mountain, the immense landscape of the continental interior--all of its seasons and its sounds--lay like memory in her blood. She could tell of the Crows, whom she had never seen, and of the Black Hills, where she had never been. I [Tosamah] wanted to see in reality what she had seen more perfectly in the mind's eye. (129)

Her communal memory is just as real as if it were a memory of her own physical event and, because she has faith in the truth of that memory, it provides her with a level of perfection.

Like his characters, Momaday claims to experience perfect memories which others might consider lacking in factuality. Momaday recounts a story about his deceased grandmother, Ko-sahn, who appears to him and, when he tells her that she exists only in his imagination, replies,

> You imagine I am here in this room, do you not? That is worth something. You see, I have existence, whole being, in your imagination. It is but one kind of being, to be sure, but it is perhaps the best of all kinds. If I am not here

in this room, grandson, then surely neither are you. (Man Made of Words 44-45)

If his grandmother does not have "whole being" then neither can Momaday himself because the two are at the identical location at the very same time. The dialogue between the two must establish an actual being for both, or neither, but not for one or the other. Momaday shows us an unsurpassed beauty, a beauty of a solitude which finds him not alone. Because his mind has dominion over the physical world, Momaday's grandmother exists in his extended present, a presence which includes a recent past established through his own experiences with his grandmother as well as a communal past established through "racial memory." Momaday posits the idea that memory and imagination create a reality of their own, and sums up the feeling projected by this story about his own grandmother in the final sentence of his "A Word on Billy the Kid," the preface to a collection of short stories (maybe even recollections) in which Momaday creates a life--his own life--with the legendary Billy the Kid: "All else of what follows is imagined; nonetheless, it is so" (Presence 43). "It is so" because Momaday imagines it to be so. His imagination creates a memory which, in turn, leads to a reality for Momaday. The strength of these creations leads Momaday to argue for the recognition of the power of total language--the spoken and the unspoken. Imagination may encompass ideas expressed in silent words,

but it may also encompass a different "language" of the mind which consists of verbally inexpressible feelings and visual images.

The importance of this total power cannot be overlooked if full being is to be possessed; the power in the unlimited imagination, as well as the importance in listening to the stories, becomes evident throughout Momaday's own life. In The Man Made of Words, Momaday asserts, "In the oral tradition stories are told not merely to entertain or to instruct; they are told to be believed" (3). Momaday tells of his experiences with Billy the Kid, just as he also tells of a conversation with his 'dead,' a term which may or may not fully apply here, grandmother. Great power dwells within a person's imagination and, in House Made of Dawn as well as in Momaday's own life, this power can make the unreal real, the dead alive, and the unbeliever believe.

Risk Within Memory

Within the beauty of the Native American oral tradition lies a risk created by the element of memory; Peter Nabokov observes that

> the paradox of memorized history that is spoken and heard is that while it can preserve intimacy and locality over astonishing time depths, it seems to be only one generation away from extinction. It is a fragile linkage of spider

strands across time. (145)

The fragility Nabokov describes results from the human aspect of the oral tradition: the story's susceptibility to change according to the teller's agenda or lack thereof. The oral tradition potentially alters the stories, teller by teller, and the risk lies in how the narrators alter the stories as they are told.

This risk of the oral tradition may prompt more and more Native American writers to record their tribal stories and ceremonies. However, recording of such stories may not pass a language, the beauty of the original words, to new generations of American Indians and, I would argue, a portion of the power may well be lost if the tribal language disappears from memory. Susan Power expresses the problem in The Grass Dancer when the spirit of Red Dress laments, "I saw the language shrivel, and though I held out my hand to catch the words, so many of them slipped away, beyond recall" (255). For Red Dress, the linguistic presence is a physical presence. Lost language leads to unwanted silence, unlike the chosen silence which lends power to an individual.

Alexie's Lone Ranger and Tonto portrays another form of "negative" silence: the voice muted by death, a further diminishment of the language and of the tradition. When Norma says, "Every one of our elders who dies takes a piece of our past away . . . . And that hurts more because I don't

know how much of a future we have" (167), she speaks not only of the physical presence of the tribe, but of its linguistic presence as well. The past here is located only within the passed-on tradition. For Alexie, the future may be grim because tradition is not being passed on to new generations of American Indians. In the same book, Junior discusses the middle-aged Norma, whom everyone calls grandmother because she attempts to serve as a sort of "cultural lifeguard":

> I knew her back when there was good fry bread to be eaten at the powwow, before the old women died and took their recipes with them. That's how it's going. Sometimes it feels like our tribe is dying a piece of bread at a time. (199)

The humor used by Alexie in Lone Ranger and Tonto does nothing to diminish the seriousness of the problem he sees for his tribe, for all Indian tribes. Through his texts and his politically motivated statements, Alexie makes it clear that he sees the importance of the role of caretaker or maintainer of the culture, an assertion which I will return to in a later discussion of Indian Killer.

Momaday also elaborates on the dilemma of loss, positing that the oral tradition "demonstrates the importance of memory and the importance of listening carefully" (qtd. in Woodard 120). The need for this "listening carefully" creates a stronger link to the past,

rendering it organic as both the speaker and hearer participate in its continuation and recollection. However, the problem lies within that very organicism: loss of either element depletes the history and mutes the experiences of the People. Momaday continues, "There's always the very tenuous link between being and nonbeing in the oral tradition. If the word is lost, it is lost forever." However, is it more than a mere void? If "we exist in the element of language," as Momaday asserts in The Man Made of Words, what happens when the actual language disappears? Here, we are not simply discussing the continuous minor organic changes within a language, but rather an extinction of this representation of a people which, according to Momaday, builds the actual identity of those very people.

Although Momaday finds solace in the beauty of the language of his ancestors, even he himself admits that he does not possess the ability to speak the language well:

> Now when I hear Kiowa spoken--mostly by the older people who are passing away--it is to me very good. The meaning most often escapes me, but the sound is like a warm wind that arises from my childhood. It is the music of memory. I have come to know that much of the power and magic and beauty of words consist not in meaning but in sound. (Man Made of Words 7)

If a writer and proponent of the power of words, a caretaker

of tribal culture, such as Momaday, does not learn the language of his tribe, we certainly may be close to that one generation from extinction of many Native American languages. And, more importantly, if words create being in the manner to which Momaday ascribes, much of the identity of a people may be lost with the loss of the tribal language.

However, critic Jarold Ramsey discusses the danger of assuming that all Native scribes write with the goal of serving as spokesperson for their tribes. Since readers cannot necessarily know authors' goals, Ramsey believes it is just as important to consider the authors' selective uses of Native myth and traditions. The silence, that which is left out of the texts, must be considered in an evaluation. Likewise, silences within the writers' lives can also be considered an important part of evaluation. I would agree with Ramsey that an author's lack of fluency in a language which he claims holds the actual creative powers of his people must also be considered. Ramsey addresses the ethnographic value and critical importance of this issue of language:

> In that shady region where ethnography blends into biography, for example, we need to know more than we can get from dust-jacket blurbs and publishers' releases about how and where Indian writers have come by their sense of heritage, and about their

> educations as writers. Surely it matters, critically, that N. Scott Momaday does not speak Kiowa. (187)

If a culture loses its language, will the words that have "always existed," according to Vizenor, and those which "transcend time and have perpetual being," according to Momaday, suddenly cease to exist? Momaday himself has told us that this memory serves as the "link between being and nonbeing." If this is, in fact, the case, then the stories cannot truly continue to thrive, to remain alive past the Native storytellers' own lives, if the language ceases.

For Alexie's John Smith, in the novel Indian Killer, the failure to connect to his heritage is fatal. He only finds a sense of peace after he steps off a skyscraper. His fall is slow and deliberate, and it is only as he falls that "he finally and completely understood the voices in his head" (412). His anagnorisis comes too late. In a 1996 interview, Alexie indicates that he sees one of the great tragedies facing Native American youth as the dislocation, such as the one he creates for his character John Smith, which specifically occurs when an Indian is taken from an Indian home and placed in a non-Native setting. Alexie posits a combination of ideas expressed by Momaday and critics of his idea of "racial memory." Indian Killer suggests that Indians hold innate memories, and such memories can only contribute to self-realization and

identity development if, in fact, the individual possesses the tools to uncover their truth--a recognition John Smith cannot realize due to his upbringing in a white family. Alexie posits the idea that nature must be coupled with nurture for the Native self to unfold. Only after this recognition of self-identity occurs can a reconciliation with the tribal community be realized.

The ceremony of rediscovering one's self, the recognition, cannot come to full disclosure unless the individual can look not only toward the future, but also to the past, to an often distant heritage which may not involve his or her own personal experience but, nonetheless, incorporates the individual's very essence of self. Susan L. Roberson recognizes the huge rift between past and present as the primary problem presented in Momaday's The Ancient Child. In a discussion about the character Set, Roberson states that "he has only an incomplete idea of himself" (37). Like Indian Killer's John Smith, Set does not know his father or, initially, his father's heritage and, as a result, is "orphaned from his own past and the past of his people" (37). However, Set makes the journey, the homecoming, of which John can only dream. He discovers enough to go to the place which allows him to uncover more of his identity, an identity which provides contentment within his very being.

In relation to these homecomings and self-discoveries,

I begin to wonder if I am right in placing such importance on the tribal language. It would seem to me that I am not applying the "ethnocentric bias" to which Calvin Martin speaks. Martin states that this bias is "the tendency to interpret another culture using the norms and values of one's own culture as a point of reference" (27). Although avoiding a particular bias would not appear to be a danger, it would seem that by avoiding this particular bias I am possibly, like Power's McVay, overlooking the greater implications of language's power. Again, the complexities of these issues arise. Does a person single out another culture as completely distinct from his or her own, actually establishing a sort of alienation of such culture in the process; or, does one look at the other culture in terms of similarities with his or her own? By using my own culture as a "point of reference" in relation to my feelings regarding an individual's tribal language, two distinct problems arise. First of all, if I consider my 'white' heritage, I am left to recognize that I, like many others, do not speak both of the languages of my known ancestors. Stories of great-grandparents' struggles can be related, but not in the original language which they were told, incorporating the nuances of such language. By applying one's own cultural experience as a point of reference for Native American experiences regarding the importance of stories and memory, one must allow for the possibility that

the actual tribal language may not be as important as the stories themselves, and that realization of a connection to a people and heritage can occur without the traditional language of those ancestors.

However, the second problem which rises in conflict with the first one comes about because of Momaday's own emphasis on his native language and the importance of native language which he emphasizes with Abel in House Made of Dawn. Momaday himself has expressed that he finds great peace in hearing his native language spoken. And, although attempts are being made to make learning of many Native languages possible, this language as well as numerous other Native languages is in jeopardy of becoming extinct and, therefore, not being "heard" by future generations. In House Made of Dawn, Momaday allows his protagonist, Abel, to come to his very self-discovery by remembering the language, the prayers of his tribe. Herein lies the dilemma. If Native Americans do not address the problem of an individual learning the language himself, but rather relying on the intense feelings which he receives when he hears others speak the language, then dire consequences may occur for future generations. Momaday has heard the older members of his tribe speak their native language, and Abel recalls hearing the elders sing the traditional prayers, but who will future generations of Indians hear if the Momadays and the Abels of today fail to learn their native tongues? This

silencing of tribal culture may well be the most tragic silencing of all.

SECTION IV

SILENCE AS A SANCTUARY OF SOUND

> "We are afraid to be alone. Silence reminds us of our isolation."
> --N. Scott Momaday (qtd. in Woodard 107)

Silence as Sanctuary

Keith H. Basso, in his study of Western Apache culture, addresses the idea of silence: "Although the form of silence is always the same, the function of a specific act of silence--that is, its interpretation by and effect upon other people--will vary according to the social context in which it occurs" (82). As Basso suggests, even though different instances of silence, the absence of sound, often appear the same to the listener, the motivation for and the meaning of that silence may vary greatly. And, maybe more importantly, the consequences of such silence, especially if it is a chosen silence, may differ dramatically.

In House Made of Dawn, the idea of sustaining identity by knowing when to use words and when to remain silent finds its most vivid expression in Abel's trial scene, in which we see that after "he had told his story once, simply, Abel refused to speak" (102). Basso indicates that silence occurs in "social situations in which participants [Western

Apaches] perceive their relationships with one another to be ambiguous and/or unpredictable" (94). Basso's assertion regarding Western Apaches also can be seen as one possible reason for Abel's silence; Abel finds himself in a situation where he begins with little or no control. However, there may be more, a lesson given and learned, involved in the timing of Abel's silence. Momaday, who Vizenor quotes in his preface, interprets this wordlessness as an extension of an oral text:

> In the telling of a story there are silences in which words are anticipated or held on to, heard to echo in the still depths of imagination. In the oral tradition silence is the sanctuary of sound. (Vizenor ix)

Momaday suggests language's true continuance derives from the "holy" place of silence. For Abel, the resonance of his words locates itself within his muteness, which serves to deepen the impact of the spoken words upon those hearing them. Because Abel understands the power of words, he also realizes that the absence of words, by its very opposition to speech, adds tension and energy to the story.

The verbal power created by his silence is not Abel's sole reason for refusing to continue to speak. In House Made of Dawn, Abel takes this sanctuary of silence for self-preservation, imposing a type of willful inarticulation upon himself in order to control the situation. Because the

lawyers in the room "[w]ord by word by word . . . dispos[e] of him in language, their language" (102), Abel must oppose them with wordlessness, the only weapon he has to equal their words in their language: although all the men speak English in the scene, their cultural differences thwart Abel's efforts to impart knowledge to the lawyers in their own "language."

Although the reader may initially view Abel's refusal to speak any further as indicative of the "traditional" image of the stoic and inexpressive Indian, a closer examination reveals Abel's silence to be a retreat from the foreign culture surrounding him. Momaday explains this withdrawal as a result of Abel finding, perhaps, that his mode of speech does not work for him outside his own culture:

> little by little, as this is driven home to [Abel], he falls silent. In the court scene, where everybody is not only talking in something other than his language but talking in a language that is even more highly artificial than languages in general--legalese--at that point he's just done in. Language becomes his enemy. (qtd. in Woodard 121)

In order to preserve his very life, Abel has no choice but to become silent. If Abel can be constructed by language (fully or even partially), then he can also be deconstructed

in the same manner. He believes the white men plan to "dispose of him in words" (102), so he will not participate. In refusing to speak, Abel forces the lawyers to repeat his words as they question him, to reveal themselves through their language and tone. While the courtroom audience may not comprehend fully the power silence renders to Abel, the reader should.

Despite the power Abel extracts from this moment, we see also the harm the entire situation does to him. Momaday explains that the white men have "reduced [Abel] to something almost subhuman" (qtd. in Woodard 123). However, even in his vulnerable state, Abel understands that he must be cautious in his dealings with those men who do not understand language in the same manner he, Abel, understands it. These men rely solely on words and language, and their manipulation of these, rather than on a combination of the words and the feelings these words elicit--words and feelings which Abel believes would lead to the truth, both with a small "t" as in the particular situation at hand, and with a large "T" as in the Platonic ideal, where the unexpressed feeling is closer to "truth" than any word which, by its very nature, serves merely as a representation.[5] Since Abel cannot count on these men to hear both the meaning (definition) and "meaning" (the storyteller's hope, the listener's experience), he must take his power from his silence. This silence leads to the other

men battering him with words which, although Abel goes to jail, the reader is expected to recognize are increasingly impotent.

In Lone Ranger and Tonto, silence brings stories into existence: "Thomas went into his house, closed the door behind him, and heard a new story come to him in silence afterward" (75). Thomas' reflective nature is creatively powerful. Similarly, Erdrich also exemplifies a power within silence, a community-building power. In Tracks the unspoken, the silence, often supplies a new awareness to the listener. When he comes to Nanapush for his help in luring Fleur, Eli shows his determination through his silence. He listens intently to the many stories which Nanapush relates, causing the latter to think, "Maybe his new, steady coolness was the thing that turned my mind, the quiet of him. He was different, sitting there so still. It struck me that he had come into his growth" (45). At first Nanapush did not plan to help Eli, but Eli's contemplative silence changes Nanapush's mind. Eli's dream, his desire toward Fleur, is not a passing fancy but rather a well thought out decision. Much later in the novel, silence again serves as the key for the listeners. After a separation between Eli and Fleur, Eli returns to reconcile with her. Community members who are fishing in Matchimanito Lake listen for sounds from Fleur's cabin until "they heard the satisfaction of silence. Then they turned away and crept back with hope" (130). Hope

is restored to the members of this community through the loving silence which they hear that winter at the lake.

Critical Silencings

The consequences of the unexpressed word or idea vary, again, due to the element of choice. A partial loss of culture will occur with the loss of Native languages, the silencing of the many nuances a language brings to its culture. However, more subtle silencings occur within the very context of critical response to the works and identities of Indian authors. Considering one way to validate Native texts, James Ruppert asks the question: "How native is it?" While the question suggests judgement of texts based on their Native-ness, Ruppert suggests that the "successful contemporary Native writer can create a text that merges delegitimizing influences while continuing oral tradition and culture. The text is both substantially Native and substantially Western" (6). So, if the text can legitimately be considered to be of both cultures, can the author as well? Many non-Native critics would say "no," that the author must align himself or herself with one culture or the other, leading to the greater concern regarding the distinctions found in the complex question of Native American authors' identities as measured by blood, by genealogy. To pass judgement in this manner could very well silence authors who may not be part of a genealogical

heritage considered sufficiently "Native."

Murray considers this complexity as an extension of his discussion of "using or adapting White literary forms to express or translate Indian traditional materials" (65), and Krupat himself considers the complexity of judging an author's work by "blood quantums" (Turn to the Native 60). However, Jace Weaver believes Krupat contradicts himself by judging Native authors using genealogy. Non-Native critics such as Krupat and Murray, who argue genealogical distinctions, serve as just one more form of Euroamerican silencing, of marginalization, of Native voices by claiming some are more relevant than others. Apparently Krupat would prefer to see many Native storytellers/authors remain in this marginalized state, since he "posits a pure, authentic Native identity counterposed to the 'mixed blood' status of many natives" (Weaver 9). Joseph Bruchac effectively explains the problem: "American racism takes some strange turns, and there seems to be a strong bias, even now, toward discounting certain writers by saying they are not Indian enough genetically to be called Indian writers" ("Contemporary Native American Writing" 323). Bruchac discusses the fact that critics do not tend to make this distinction so severely when discussing other minority writers, such as African Americans, and, therefore, to do so with Native American authors is yet again a silencing of Native voices. Bruchac, however, provides a solution to the

dilemma: he suggests that the classification should be left to tribal judgment.[6] I would suggest that this may somewhat "silence" the non-Native critics' voices in determination of and judgment upon Native authors and the Native American literary canon; however, it seems a more appropriate silencing--one which leaves critical evaluation of the Native texts open to all critics, while limiting identity judgments to the authors' own tribal communities. Although the concept seems to be an excellent one in theory, developing a criteria and process for tribal judgement would most likely prove to be just as elusive as any current common criteria for the evaluation.

Consequences of the Unexpressed

In the introduction, I looked at the idea expressed by Anna Lee Walters that the power of both sound and silence must be simultaneously recognized. Walters's strong assertions seem to further imply that to fail to recognize the importance of both may result in undesired consequences. Susan Power shows us that the same silence may result in differing consequences for the individuals such silence envelops. In The Grass Dancer, Crystal Thunder's lack of interest in tradition leads her to be silent and unresponsive to her mother, Anna's, desire to teach the teenage girl the mystical powers of Indian medicines. For Crystal, her own silence provides a sanctuary from the

mysterious ways of her mother, ways which scare others in the community and embarrass Crystal. However, for Anna, the silence of her daughter is deafening. Anna thinks, "My daughter's thoughts were scattered throughout the house, uncollected, an explosion of them like shattered glass" (154). The thoughts are "uncollected" and, I would venture to guess, uncollectible. This silence is loud and physical, leading Anna to feel isolated within her own home: "My daughter's thoughts were noisy on the other side of my bedroom wall" (153). For Anna, the lack of communication between her and her daughter leads to a separation which she cannot overcome by herself. The silent thoughts surround Anna, envelop her, yet escape her grasp.

Through another heart-wrenching parent-child relationship, Power provides an additional example of the varying consequences of silence. Indicating that the isolation silence often renders can be felt by people of all ages and familial positions, Power reverses the roles: the mother is silent and the child desires verbal communication. For Lydia, her seventeen-year, self-imposed silence provides a safe haven from the risk of the spoken word, a risk she refuses to take since the deaths of her husband and older son. For Lydia's surviving son, Harley, who has never heard his mother's spoken voice, the silence creates a void which Harley can neither understand nor overcome. Lydia sees the silence as a protective device for her son, while Harley

believes that his mother so loved her other son that there is now not enough love left for him. Lydia, in her refusal to speak, cannot clarify her love for Harley to him. And, Harley, because his mother has never spoken to him, lacks the ability to question her regarding his concerns or to express to her the void, the emptiness, which he feels inside himself. Lydia has made a choice to be silent which results in negative consequences for Harley.

Unlike Crystal and Lydia's decisions to be silent in The Grass Dancer, and Abel's decision to be silent in House Made of Dawn, sometimes words become so alien to a person that he or she has no choice but to remain silent. Such is the case with Indian Killer's John Smith. Because of the noise in John's head, he cannot understand a word his foreman at work is saying to him. Alexie states, "All that morning, the foreman spoke a strange, unintelligible language" (130-131). Of course, we know that the foreman's language is English, which is also John's language; however, John has moved into such a state of cultural isolation, the type of complete isolation which Nabokov speaks of, that even the easiest of conversation escapes him and he has no choice but to remain silent.

Although some of Abel's silences in House Made of Dawn are positive, others are problematic like those experienced by Alexie's character, John. A lost silence often appears in relation to Abel--a silence arising from his failure to

find words which fit his needs. In part three of House Made of Dawn, Ben Benally discusses Abel's struggles to vocalize his thoughts to outsiders:

> They can't help you because you don't know how to talk to them. They have a lot of words, and you know they mean something, but you don't know what, and your own words are no good because they're not the same, they're different, and they're the only words you've got. Everything is different, and you don't know how to get used to it. (158)

Abel's distress over trying to express himself verbally to these white men intensifies. He knows what he feels--what he would like to express--but he cannot transfer that feeling into language. The "right" words will not come to him and, therefore, he must maintain his silence.

Abel's silence is somewhat forced upon him. Upon his return from military service, he has trouble connecting with his tribal community in Walatowa. His isolation from his community has resulted in his inability to verbalize his feelings. At first he feels he must be dumb, then realizes, "Not dumb--silence was the older and better part of custom still--but inarticulate" (58). It is one thing to choose to be silent, but an altogether different situation to be unable to communicate and, once Abel recognizes the distinction, he eventually can make the choice his own.

Choice versus inability is a theme Momaday returns to

continuously--in novels, essays, and even in works for children. His children's Christmas story, Circle of Wonder, begins, "Once there was a poor mute boy whose name was Tolo" (7). Tolo, unable to communicate, listens intensely to his storytelling grandfather. After his grandfather's death, young Tolo yearns to tell the stories and his experiences to others, but he cannot. In Circle of Wonder, Tolo cannot communicate, and in House Made of Dawn, Abel has lost the ability to communicate. He cannot speak to his grandfather, he cannot pray or sing: Abel is "inarticulate." Just like Tolo, Abel desires articulation and even considers what he would sing if only he had the ability: "It would be a creation song" (59). Abel needs to participate in creation; he needs to meld himself back into this community. Abel searches for identity--a reality which can be accomplished with the right words.

But how easy is it to find the right combination of words which will lead to this innately-driven identity? At times even the experienced storyteller, such as Momaday himself, may be unable to find the words to voice his own intense feelings. A good example of this dilemma can be found in his memoir, The Names, in which Momaday says of his mother:

> Even now I cannot express the feelings between us. I have great faith in words, but in this there are no words at last; there is only a kind of perfect

silence--the stillness of a late autumn afternoon in the village and the valley--in which I listen for the sound of her voice. (153)

Momaday knows how he feels, yet he cannot express that feeling in words--not even when thinking back on his relationship with his mother. Even though he is a writer who has built an identity based on words, Momaday states, "Language is limited. We know that because we know there are things that we can perceive but not express" (qtd. in Woodard 105). Even with the strong emotions which tie Momaday to his mother, he cannot come up with the language to relate those feelings to others. He has had time for reflection, but silence prevails; however, because of Momaday's strong emotions, even these feelings which defy verbalization continue to have a life of their own.

Momaday further voices this problem of the unexpressed in House Made of Dawn. In his youth, Abel often achieved an understanding without words. When thinking about his mother, Abel remembers that he knew she was going to die soon: "It was nothing he was told, but he knew it anyway and without understanding, as he knew already the motion of the sun and the seasons" (11). His knowledge is as natural as nature itself. Abel may be unsure why or how he gains the understanding, but even without the actual spoken words, he recognizes the connection between nature and people, life and death, and the knowledge of the unspoken. Momaday makes

it clear that the unexpressed word, the unexpressed thought, does not always lead to a negative consequence. Rather, at times, there develops a greater, more significant, more holistic understanding of self which becomes clear only in the silence.

SECTION V

CONCLUSION

CONNECTIONS BETWEEN SOUND AND SILENCE

"That's what Indian time is. The past, the future,
all of it is wrapped up in the now.
That's how it is.
We are trapped in the now."
--from The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven (22)

With the beauty which he lends to his words, it is no wonder that N. Scott Momaday is one of today's leading Native American writers. No. It is evident why he is considered one of America's great writers. Momaday explores discoveries within silence, and with the delightful thought of innate memories and the potential such memories may create within our lives.

Within the works of Momaday, as well as other Native American writers, we have discovered it is not silence alone, but silence coupled with memory which leads to the powerful discoveries of self, the coming home. Therefore, the trick may be to recognize the truth within the memories of a home place. And, although beautiful memories are often passed from one person to the next, it may be crucial to remember that sometimes the truth of the story becomes unclear. In Lone Ranger and Tonto, Alexie indicates this as

a problem when Victor thinks

> My father always remembered the second before my mother left him for good and took me with her. No. I remembered the second before my father left my mother and me. No. My mother remembered the second before my father left her to finish raising me all by herself. (34)

Victor struggles to recall the truth, a truth which he may or may not actually know. Victor's truth fluctuates with each person who tells it, and each statement may well be true from the perspective of the one remembering. However, are any of the memories his, or are they all pieces of the puzzle of his life passed on to him by others? In the text, one of Alexie's characters later states, "How much do we remember of what hurts us most? I've been thinking about pain, how each of us constructs our past to justify what we feel now" (196). So, if we reconstruct our past, and our memory of that past, how reliable is it? And, if that memory leads to our identity, how strong is that identity?

The complications of memory leading to identity are enormous and sometimes seem to lead to a shaky identity at best. Still, the attempt to recover the past may be what eventually leads people to the truth within their individual searches. Roberson explores this idea of a homecoming and self awareness. Roberson states that while "'American whites keep leaving home' to find themselves and make their

mark in the world, the hero of Native American novels 'comes home' to the self" (31). Of Momaday's novel The Ancient Child, Roberson explains

> The task of the novel is to restore him [Set] to his identity by bringing him home to his heritage and to the past that inheres in his blood, to the "racial memory" repressed, like his grief, until he migrates across the land to get an idea of himself. (35)

For this memory to return, however, it must first exist. The memory must have been "repressed."

For John Smith, in Alexie's Indian Killer, such a repressed "racial memory" cannot be retrieved until much too late. John cannot make the connection between his present and his past. Speaking to this dilemma, Roberson states that healing "cannot be complete without proper ceremony, without properly and consciously knowing his relationship to this land, to those about him, and to the complex web of life" (42). Alexie's John Smith does not possess the knowledge or the skills to make this connection occur and, as a result, the closest he comes to a healing happens as he steps off a Seattle skyscraper and comes to an understanding of himself, an understanding similar to others' discoveries made during traditional ceremonies, in his warped ceremonial fall. John Smith's outcome is a far cry from the successful connection Momaday gave us only three decades earlier in

House Made of Dawn.

The times change, but the tribal stories continue to be needed to help make this connection, and there is a sense of loss if this storytelling does not take place. For Alexie's Samuel Builds-the-Fire, this is precisely the problem: "All his friends had died and all the younger people on the reservation had no time for stories. Samuel felt like the horse must have felt when Henry Ford came along" (135). A tragic sense of loss develops when the stories go untold. Many Native American scholars find solace in a possible resurgence of interest in tradition. In the introduction to the 1979 edition of John G. Neihardt's Black Elk Speaks, Vine Deloria, Jr., states,

> The most important aspect of the book, however, is not its effect on the non-Indian populace who wished to learn something of the beliefs of the Plains Indians but upon the contemporary generation of young Indians who have been aggressively searching for roots of their own in the structure of universal reality. (xii-xiii)

The power of these words, then, according to Deloria, becomes their ability to help in the search, the self-discovery attempts, of contemporary American Indians. The words, the stories, the history, is available if only the interest remains intact or resurfaces in time for the truth of identity to be rediscovered.

And, such rediscovery may still be quite powerful indeed if Momaday's assertions regarding language and meaning are correct: "I have come to know that much of the power and magic and beauty of words consist not in meaning but in sound" (Man Made of Words 7). This philosophical idea is extremely crucial to the many Native Americans who, like Momaday, are not fluent in their native language. Krupat indicates that even though many Native writers are not fluent in their tribal languages, "all of them have indicated their strong sense of indebtedness or allegiance to the oral tradition" (The Turn to the Native 37). The power of the sound, if only tribal societies can keep that sound alive, may well be what enables these individuals to discover the great power within their language and within their identities.

In House Made of Dawn, the power evolves through the words of the text. Yet, maybe more significant, is the way in which each character gains power and identity with or without these words. It is just as important to recognize when words should be left unspoken, as it is to recognize when they must be boldly delivered. In House Made of Dawn, Abel has trouble connecting with both the language of his tribe and that of the white culture. Like Indian Killer's John Smith, Abel has the problem which Nabokov describes as being "stranded from either shore" (151). Abel's struggle with words exemplifies his struggle to place himself within

Native American culture, white culture, or both cultures--to build (or rebuild) his identity. Unlike Alexie's John Smith, Abel's plight is not fatal. However, it may have proved fatal had Abel not begun with the memory of his tribal language. The contentment which finally envelops Abel comes from this memory and seems very much like that found in Momaday's memoir The Names:

> In the seasons and among the people of the valley I was content. My spirit was quiet there. The silence was old, immediate, and pervasive, and there was great good in it . . . . Much was made of the silence. (154)

There is great power in the silence and the land, a connection and power which enables a person to fully exist.

Momaday expresses that powerful connection between silence and nature in his children's story Circle of Wonder. After the Christmas celebration, Tolo goes into the forest:

> The boy, the bird, and the beasts made a circle of wonder and good will around the real gift of the fire, and beyond them were other, wider circles, made of the meadow, the mountains, and the starry sky, all the fires and processions, all the voices and silences of all the world. (36)

In Circle of Wonder, the world consists of both sound and silence. Finally, a contentment occurs within the silence and, as a result, mute Tolo "sang of his whole being with a

voice that carried like the cry of a wolf" (40).

In a similar ceremony of self-discovery, Harley, in Power's The Grass Dancer, has a vision quest and, at the end of the four days, he hears the others coming. He can only make out some of the individual voices as they sing an honor song:

> A powerful new voice that was unfamiliar to Harley disturbed his ears . . . . Harley listened carefully, his hands curled into fists, and it was only as the song neared its end that he realized the truth. What he heard was the music of his own voice, rising above the rest. (299-300)

For Harley, self-discovery includes a new voice, a new ability, a new song. Of course, Harley knows the native language of his tribe's songs. Although his mother will not speak, others in the tribe have taken on the responsibility of teaching him the language of his people.

The song at the end of House Made of Dawn is different from that in The Grass Dancer. Paula Gunn Allen describes Abel as "a medicine person who does not understand the nature of his being or of his proper function" ("Bringing Home the Fact" 571). Only when Abel accepts his heritage, his self, does he begin to connect with his tribe. As the Dawn Runner, Abel begins to sing. But where is the real power behind Abel's newly found connection? There "was no sound, and he had no voice; he had only the words of a song"

(212). He has connected with his culture in such a way that silent words, "the music of memory," now flow. Abel's vitality evolves through this fluidity of his silent words.

Even though the words flow, Momaday leaves the reader with the realization that although the words are certainly important, verbalization of those words remains less important than feeling them internally--than knowing they reside within and allowing these words to help build or recover self-identity. Roberson asserts that

> Momaday's story [The Ancient Child] implies that personal identity is not so individual as we may think, that it is a fusion of beings who roam the shadows of memory, history, and myth. (44)

Roberson argues that the homecomings and self discoveries found within the texts of Momaday are ones which include "a dynamic fusion of identities." This fusion includes the distant past as well as the present, and may further be exemplified by Alexie in the story "A Drug Called Tradition":

> What you have to do is keep moving, keep walking, in step with your skeletons. They ain't ever going to leave you, so you don't have to worry about that. Your past ain't going to fall behind, and your future won't get too far ahead. (Lone Ranger and Tonto 22)

So, if the "past ain't going to fall behind," it would

appear useless to attempt to purposefully leave it behind. The collective energies of Native communities are needed for individuals to connect with and belong to their communities, and Native writers can help open the doors to recovery of self-identity for Indian individuals.

Bruchac feels hopeful when he states, "I have no doubt that there will be many more Native American writers acting as guides and pathfinders along those ways" ("Contemporary Native American Writing" 327). Allen also speaks to the importance of the writer in this recovery of self:

> Literature is that act of the mind which allows significances created by events to become apparent. If the work of literature is imbued with the power which is in the mind of the writer, that meaning will take a form and shape that is real and vital, and that will continue to bear meaning for generations to come. ("Bringing Home the Fact" 578)

Each Native generation must bring its displaced members to wholeness as individuals so that they can then take their respective places within their tribal communities. Self-discovery results in a connection to the tribal community.

However, connection between the individual and the tribe only can occur through active involvement in or with that community. The community provides necessary tools for the individual to come to true being. Jace Weaver provides

the term "communitism," a combination of the words community and activism, to stress that "to promote communitist values means to participate in the healing of the grief and sense of exile felt by Native communities and the pained individuals in them" (xiii). Moving from Weaver's idea to my own, I would emphasize that healing the "pained individuals" must be the first step to eliminating the grief in communities shared by such individuals. However, if Indian individuals resist the recovery of self, a resistance which often occurs due to Native emphasis on community, a connection to communal identity will not occur. The complexities are enormous; however, the process must occur in order--self-discovery leading to communal identity--or the connection will not occur at all.

For the characters in these novels, as well as many contemporary American Indians, an embracing of the past may well be the road to travel to discover the truth of identity. And that truth may be found within the recesses of the internalized memory, a memory recovered within silent contemplation--in a place of calmness which allows Native identities to surface. Tribal communities can help bring these identities to the surface, within the reach of the individuals. Silence serves as an important discovery tool in the process. This importance of internalization may be especially true if, in fact, Momaday and Tosamah's grandmother are correct about memory being established

through blood. And, if Native Americans possess the tools to find their places within their communities, like Momaday's Abel, rather than remain displaced, like Alexie's John Smith, they will discover the truths of their very existences and identities. As Jace Weaver states, "Words cannot be killed. Thoughts cannot be silenced. Identity, ultimately, cannot be suppressed" (168). Momaday suggests that a person innately knows the stories of his past, of his community, and need only be silent long enough to grasp the reality of his or her identity to make connection to that Native culture. In this case, then, the real challenge for an individual may well be to come to the point of complete acceptance as to these innate stories' relevance and importance within his or her life--not a creation, but rather an acceptance and recovery of an already innate identity.

Notes

1. I recognize the simplicity and ambiguity of the general terms which I use regularly throughout this study. In scholarship as well as history, there is a growing tendency toward pan-Indian discourse; however, such discourse often fails to take into account the variables between different tribal communities. For purposes of this study, however, I follow that pan-Indian discourse because, though it relies on generalizations, the overall complexities in my discussion are relevant for numerous, if not all, tribal communities and contemporary Native literature. Attempts to provide further separation, simply for the variety of terminology, would prove more problematic than the path I have selected.

2. Anthony Mattina discusses some of the methods of Dennis Tedlock's performance-oriented texts in his essay, "North American Indian Mythography: Editing Texts for the Printed Page," which is found in the Swann and Krupat text.

3. Kenneth Lincoln coined the term "Native American Renaissance," which also serves as the title of his 1983 book.

4. Keith H. Basso similarly argues for the importance of cultural stories: "Imagine standing there, as if in the tracks of your ancestors, and recall stories of events that occurred at that place long ago. Picture those events in your mind and appreciate, as if the ancestors themselves were speaking, the wisdom the stories contain. Bring this wisdom to bear on your own disturbing situation. Allow the past to inform your understanding of the present" (160).

5. In The Politics of Postmodernism, Linda Hutcheon discusses the complexity of expressing intense feelings in the written word: "the oratorical power that went *beyond* words can be expressed only *in* words . . . the truth of historical fact can be represented most powerfully today in self-consciously novelistic form" (91-92). These complexities grow deeper when we move to a discussion, such as this, which deals with silence expressed in a written format.

6. Brian Swann also indicates the complexities of justification of Indian identity: "Native Americans are Native Americans if they say they are, if other Native Americans say they are and accept them, and (possibly) if the values that are held close and acted upon are values upheld by the various native peoples who live in the Americas" (qtd. in Krupat Voice in the Margin 208n).

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VITA

Marlys Cervantes

Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Thesis: N. SCOTT MOMADAY'S HOUSE MADE OF DAWN: THE CRUCIAL "SILENCING" IN THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

Major Field: English

Biographical:

Education: Attended Oklahoma Baptist University, Shawnee, Oklahoma from 1979 to 1981; received Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in December 1995. Completed the requirements for the Master of Arts degree at Oklahoma State University in July 2000.

Experience: Employed by Oklahoma State University, Department of English, 1995 to present.

Professional Memberships: English Graduate Students' Association, Popular Culture Association.