

N. Scott Momaday's *The Ancient Child* And the American-Dime Novel

- Rachel Tudor

N. Scott Momaday's novel *The Ancient Child* (published in 1985) is modeled on the nineteenth-century American Dime Novel genre. The Dime Novel was usually about American Indian and white relations. The first recognizable example of this genre is Ann S. Stephens's *Molaeska; The Indian Wife of the White Hunter*, published in 1860 (Kent 81). In the Dime Novel genre there is usually a prelude which clues the reader in to the "loss" the protagonist has suffered. As a result of this loss the protagonist is isolated from society. Before long, however, he or she encounters an "insider" who "has traits similar to his [or her] own," but is a member of a community. This "insider" usually has some "possession" that has been inherited, which is threatened by one or more "villains." The protagonist is then reintegrated into the community by protecting or recovering, the insider's possession. (From, "The Automated Text: the American Dime Novel," in Kent's *Interpretation and Genre*.)

While *The Ancient Child* does not have a prelude, it does have a prologue which is an abbreviated version of the "Story of Tsoai." It is a story the Kiowas created to explain a mysterious rock formation they encountered. Momaday asserts that they "incorporated it into their experience by telling a story about it" (Woodard, *Center*, 15). As Momaday explains, all things can be accepted, if not understood, if you put them into a story" (15). The "Story of Tsoai" also helps to explain the astronomical phenomenon of the Big Dipper. Additionally, however, it is about the disappearance and loss of children. A longer version of the story, for example, tells about the tremendous grief the loss of the children caused their loved ones. The longer version appears in Chapter One or Book Two of *The Ancient Child*. In this longer version, the reader is informed that out of grief "old Koi-ehm-toya ... cut off two fingers on her left hand" (130). It seems that Momaday would not frustrate his reader's generic expectation at so early a stage in the development of his novel by omitting to cite a significant loss, therefore, we may ask: What is lost in the prologue? The answer is the children. Some may assert that the story is primarily about a boy who turns into a bear. However, which is more important when analyzing the "Story of Tsoai": That a boy turned into a bear, or that eight children were lost? The primary significance of the story to old Koi-ehm-toya is that eight children were lost. Eight children were separated from their families. What has Set, the protagonist of *The Ancient Child*, lost? He is like one of the lost children.

He, too, has lost his connection to his family. He has lost his father and mother.'

Next, the astute reader should ask, Who is the "insider" and what "possession" does he or she have that is threatened by what "villain"? And, what traits do the insider and the protagonist share? Obviously, Grey is the "insider," although she is viewed as peculiar or eccentric by the standards of her community, and the possession that she has is herself. It is her mind and her body that are repeatedly threatened by villains such as Dwight Dicks and the racist ideology that casts Indians, like herself, as otherworldly. She is struggling, like Set, to find her own sense of self. On occasion she, like Set, has been sexually abused. However, *The Ancient Child* deviates from the Dime Novel genre because Set is unable to significantly aid Grey. Unlike the protagonists of the Dime Novel, who are strong, confident types, Set is physically and mentally sick. The Dime Novels have heroes, but Set is not a hero. In fact, Set is in several ways an antihero, inasmuch as he is ineffectual, passive, and has been "stripped of certainties, values, or even meaning" (Abrams "Antihero"). Through protecting Grey, which Set's brief recovery and marriage seem to indicate he will be able to do, he would be reintegrated into the community. However, Set wanders off into the woods after he learns of Grey's pregnancy, and is not heard from again, thus, finally, circumventing the reader's expectations of the conventional Dime Novel and replacing it with a syncretic genre that tropes the Dime Novel with distinct Native American narrative features.

One unique Native American narrative device is "clustering." Michelle Trusty-Murphy suggests that Momaday characteristically uses a uniquely Kiowa form of clustering (122). Clustering and reverse-clustering involve locating the center of a story and moving out from there. This is radically different from traditional western narratives that have a beginning, middle, and end, but no center. The center is not the same as the middle; the center is what holds the story together. Trusty-Murphy specifically examines Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, but examining *House Made of Dawn* and *The Ancient Child* are also equally productive and illustrative. For example, Trusty-Murphy finds that *The Way to Rainy Mountain* is located in a real place, Rainy Mountain, and from this center she identifies grandmother, personal memory, and weather as clustering around this "place" (143). All of these things are related to one another through various interactions. For instance, grandmother is tied to blood memory which is tied to sun dance which is tied to creation which is tied to landscape which is tied to weather which is tied to gatherings which is tied to grandmother, and so on in ever widening concentric circles.

Likewise, *The Ancient Child* has a center, which Momaday makes it convenient to identify by stating in chapter 24, "this is the center of the

story" (117). Note this is not the middle of the story, the novel goes on for some three hundred pages, this is the center of the story. This is a clear indicator that this is the most important chapter in the book, it is the *center* of the story. What is the center of the story? Catlin Setman explains to his son Set:

Loki, this matter of having no name is perhaps the center of the story. Words are names. The old man (storyteller) understood that, and he used his understanding to soothe and console his people. And everyone felt better. (117)

The center of *The Ancient Child* is Set's search for his self, for his name. Set remembers being called Loki by his father. He remembers the story his father told him about a boy who wanders into camp, and then is gone in the morning. The event is so startling to the people that the storyteller makes up a story about what happened, explaining it was not a boy who wandered into camp, but a bear:

Because he could not simply take the little boy away from them. That would have been to deceive them, They could no longer have believed their eyes and ears. So he offered them something in the child's stead, a bear in the boy's place. And, they thought: Yes, so it was; it must indeed have been a bear; yes, a little bear came into our camp and babbled to us. Curious and playful it was, a cub. And, Loki, imagine, the little boy must have returned to the woods that same night... and surely the Piegan camp dreamed of him and how they would play with him in the morning, Perhaps the women thought of how they would make him handsome shirts and leggings, and of how they would give him a name, for he was an extraordinary being. And then, when it was suggested to them that he was a bear, what must have been their response? Oh, they were relieved, for they had not then to explain a strange and unlikely thing to themselves. But they must have known a sense of loss. And the boy, Loki, what became of him? What brought him to the camp of the Piegans in the first place? And what urged him away? Was it a yearning, a great loneliness? Did his tracks become the tracks of a bear? Did his lively, alien tongue fade into the whimper and growl of a beast? (121-2)

A bear wandering into the camp was not so unusual, and the people accepted that explanation. Their world was in order again. However, the boy did not really turn into a bear. The people simply accepted the story that he was a bear all along because they could not understand a world in which strange boys wander in and out of camp. This story also serves as an interpretive key to the novel.

The Bear-Boy story is also, even primarily, about the story and the storyteller—two elements that have been critically neglected. For example, why are readers, like the listeners to the story of the boy who turned into a bear, so willing and desirous to accept a fabrication? Is it because it is easier to accept than any alternative? Is it easier to accept that a boy or man can turn into a bear than that he is estranged from his family by the conditions that he finds himself in nowadays? Are we so willing to accept any story so we can keep our world in order too? Of course, many are, but, as the father asked the son: did the boys track become those of a bear? Did his language fade into the whimper and growl of a bear *just because* that is the story the storyteller decided to tell the people to soothe them, and the people chose to believe to keep their world in order. No, the only thing that changed was the people's definition of what was real.

In a clustering or reverse-clustering of *The Ancient Child* we have Set's search for his self at the center. Then there are all of the people who contribute to that sense of self, Grey, Catlin Setman, and Bent, in widening concentric circles, Sister Stella Francisca, who had molested Set when he was a boy, Dwight Dicks, the man who raped Grey, Set's lovers, Lola and Alais, Grey's sexual partners, Murphy Dicks and Perfecto Atole, etc. in ever-widening circles. The important thing is recognizing the story that Catlin Setman told his son Set, and Set's search for his name, as the center of the story.

Reinforcing this *center* is the question asked in the first line of the book: "Quien es?" Those words are reportedly the last words Billy the Kid hears in his life. That question is fatal to him because he does not know the answer. He dies because he could not answer that question. "Quien es?" does mean "Who is there?/" but it also means, "Who are you?" Obviously, it is essential that Set discover his origins, and find out who he is in order to survive. Later, Grey asks Billy, "why didn't you drop the son of a bitch?" (11); emphasizing, once again the center, or theme of the novel: To not know who one is fatal, even for a legend. Also, associated with Billy's death is a young woman, Paulita Maxwell. Significantly, Grey fancies herself Paulita.

From the reader's first introduction to Grey, it is obvious that she has a problem recognizing and living in reality. In addition to her imaginary conversations with Billy the Kid, she also has visions, and is able to "burst into tears" at will (12). She considers herself beautiful, tall and lithe, with a delicate mouth, and aquiline nose, when, in fact, she is "not more than five feet five inches," with heavy brows, a short, tilted nose, square jaw, crooked teeth, a prominent mole on the left corner of her mouth, and downy (hairy) arms (18-9). She has delusions, not only about what she hears and sees, but also about her own body. Although she is not beautiful in any conventional sense of the word, the narrator

does engage in some clever *jeu de mots* by saying she has a "beauty beyond telling" (19). Which can be interpreted as meaning you could not tell that she was beautiful, or she had a beauty that could not be told.

The reader is then introduced to Grey's sexual partners. First, Perfecto Atole, a middle-aged Jicarilla man (26), Murphy Dicks, a boy her own age, and his father Dwight Dicks, who rapes her after his son boasts of having sex with Grey in exchange for a horse. Later, we are introduced to Grey's last lover in the novel, Set Lockman. Set is a 44 year-old painter, who is beginning to feel alienated from his art because, as a commodity, it was beginning to determine him instead of him determining it. He is not happy. For instance, though men and women seemed to admire him, "there were times when the *disillusionment* was so great that he wept"(emphasis added 37). It seemed to him that nobody cared about what was in his soul (37). What he wanted, more than anything, was a child, someone to see what he did with a child's eye instead of the "narrow-eyed glib" and "calculations" of dealers and critics (37). The real meaning of a person's life's work is how it is seen by his or her children, without a child he became "sick and tired/" yes "sick and tired" (38), Note, "sick and tired" is repeated twice with an affirmation.

We learn some of the reasons for Set feeling sick and tired. His mother died in childbirth, his father died in an accident when he was seven, he was placed in an orphanage, the Peter and Paul Home, where he was sexually abused by Sister Stella Francesca until he was adopted by Bent, a philosophy professor. Set remembers being called Loki and having a dog called Lukie. He has vivid dreams about his mother, whom he cannot possibly remember, but strangely enough he has no recollection of his father until he is notified by telegram of grandmother Kopemah's death, a telegram with his father's name on it sent by Grey.

Set becomes fascinated with his father's name on the telegram. The telegram has his and his father's name on it, it was a thing of "impenetrable meaning, an enigma, perhaps an omen. It bore his father's name, therefore his spirit" (52). His brooding becomes restlessness, then determination and he travels to Oklahoma to visit his father's family.

Once there, he encounters Grey, whom he mistakes for a boy, a "deranged boy" (60). Louis Owens speculates this "boy" is really an apparition, "Set's transformational self, the boy of the Kiowa myth" (124). However, the text does not support that reading. For instance, Jessie instantly recognizes Set's description of the "boy" as Grey (66), and later when he awakens to see the same "boy/" he calls out "Grey," and she answers him (72-3). Thereby confirming, without doubt, that she is the "boy." In addition, the realistic description of Grey as being short, stout, with heavy brows and downy arms also supports her being mistaken for a boy in the dark or at a distance.

Set and Grey are both obsessed with the dead. Set thinks visiting his father's grave and the graves of his ancestors will help him remember his father and to find himself. Instead, he finds that "he was out of place among the groups of strangers ... weeds had grown up long ago over the grave of Catlin Setmaunt" (105). The "weeds" functioning metaphorically, of course, to show the passage of time and events between him and the father he knew as a child. This scene is chilling because it seems to forecast the hopelessness of Set's goal of finding his father and his self. Similarly chilling is the image of Grey sleeping on her grandmother's grave and imagining that she hears her grandmother telling her Set is a bear (116). Reader's familiar with Western literature will expect that nothing good can come of these things. Grey and Set have a macabre bond. * Separately, they may be all right, but together they exacerbate one another's injuries.

Interestingly enough, Set knows, or at least suspects, that he is going mad. Set wonders if he is "losing his mind" (61). And, the narrator says, "Set reels inside himself, he applies color to his brain with a knife ... a deranged boy (himself) glares from the shadows" (123), he interrogates the mirror, a "Cyclops," a monster with one vacant eye, "are you Set?" (132). In addition, he becomes unaware of his everyday surroundings, like the phone which he does not notice ringing (133), staring into the mirror for an interminable amount of time, .and loss of appetite. He asks himself, for example, "When did I last eat, I ought to be hungry?" (135), and, of course, talking to himself. Why? Again, because he needs his father. Set pleads, "Bent, be my father" (136). He asks when did Lukie, his dog, die. Lukie is an obvious metaphor for himself; his father called him Loki. Loki and Lukie, Lukie and Loki. Therefore, what he is really asking is when did Loki, Catlin's son, die; and when was Set, Bent's son, born? Who am I? Immediately after this questioning, he reiterates his fear that he is losing his mind: "I am beginning to doubt my own mind" (138). Furthermore, he reflects that this crisis . is not a new one: "A disease has been eating at my inside for years ... (I am) beginning to be desperate ... I am fighting for my life" (138).

Another indicator that he is going mad is his dreams about himself being called Loki. Interestingly, the voice calling him is his, but he does not know who or where he is. He is in search of himself (140). Indeed, he has not known who he was for a long time. For instance, in his first meeting with Jason, his agent, and Lola, his lover, he jokes about a "creeping figure among the trees, a shadow" being a self-portrait (144). He explains that from the time he was adopted that he was "forced to be responsible for creating an identity," but his ability to maintain that identity was coming to an end. Likewise, Grey forces him to be responsible for creating an identity which he is able to maintain for a

while, until he disappears into the woods. The point is, he has a debilitating need to please those who are close to him. He readily accepts the responsibility for acting out the role they foist on him as long as he is able precisely because he does not have a clear sense of self.

The person who almost succeeds in intuiting this awareness in him is the art critic Alais Sancere. She points out to Set that the image of a horseman in one of his paintings is like a centaur, or a man becoming a centaur. She tells Set about Kafka's story of the Red Indian and horse becoming one; Kafka's work being an exemplar of the metamorphic and malleable nature of the human psyche. To Set, "It seemed as if something was rising to the level of consciousness, a recognition, a truth," and "it was as if Alais Sancere had saw very clearly something in me that I had failed to see in myself" (161). Also, Loki, to Western readers, is a Norse god, "a cunning trickster who had the ability to change his shape and sex" (*Britannica* "Loki"). The facet of this Nordic mythical figure that Momaday chooses to reference is his malleability, not his trickster side. For example, Set does not perform lewd acts (willingly) nor does he play mischievous jokes on others, but he is metamorphic. An aspect of Loki that is often overlooked, which is also characteristic of Set, is his suffering. Nordic Loki was bound to a rock and tortured like the Greek Prometheus. Set's adopted father, Bent, was a philosophy professor. Consequently, Set is probably more familiar with the Western metaphorical meaning of the name Loki, than he is with why his real Native American father called him Loki.

However, before he is able to make the connection, Bent dies. Then he is overcome with guilt and grief, guilt for cheating on his lover Lola with Alais, and Lola being unable to contact him about Bent's stroke because of his affair with Alais, until Bent has already died. Set has a breakdown and helplessly pleads; "Bent, be my father. Be my father. Bent, Move you" (162).

The text of the novel shifts its focus back to Grey and her fantasies about her life with Billy the Kid, her ability to talk to animals and the dead in her dreams. The text makes a careful distinction: "Above all she had been born to dream ... in her dreams ... the animals and dead talk to her" (173). Not that "animals and the dead talk to her," but "*in her dreams* the animals and dead talk to her" {emphasis added 173}. And, "To dream that was at the center of life, hers anyway" (173). Even her idea of herself as a medicine woman was a product of her dreams: being a medicine woman "was in her to do so; it was her purpose, her reason for being; she had *dreamed* it" (author's emphasis 173):

In her *dreams* the grandmother instructed her. In her *dreams* the earth, eagles, fishes, coyotes, tortoises, mice and spiders instructed her. In her *dreams* she knew of things

that had long since been lost to others. She knew of things that lay in remote distances of time and space. She knew of winter impending upon the top of the world, of sheer glacial vastnesses, of huddled ancients, walking like bears through the mists. And she knew of the ancient child, the boy who turned into a bear, (emphasis added 173-4)

The point is, it was all in her dreams, just as her life with Billy the Kid was in her dreams. She dreams that she is Sister Blandina visiting Billy in jail, she imagines she is riding around naked with a turtle mask on and carrying a spear, she even thinks she turns into a turtle, she imagines she hears her grandmother's voice, and then she suddenly awakens in bed (197-202). It was all simply a dream. Grey also dreams that Set will be her husband, in her mind he is already her husband because he accepted the medicine bundle from her hand (174). And, once she has the opportunity to act on her dreams about Set, she does so by enlisting the help of Perfecto Atole.

Grey's relationship with Perfecto Atole is a strange one. He is a middle-aged man who had sex with her when she was just a child, certainly no more than an adolescent. It was her first sexual experience, and although they appear to have an amicable relationship now it is obvious that she has a lot of pent-up rage against him. She cuts up the expensive boots he gave her as a gift, perhaps a gift for having sex with him. Grey takes pleasure in telling him how she cut up the boots and in publicly displaying the remnants: "I cut the tops off and made shakers out of them" (283). What is she expecting when she asks Perfecto to attack and humiliate Set? She cannot lose in her thinking; Either Set becomes enraged and beats or even kills Perfecto, just as Abel kills Juan, in *House Made of Dawn*. Or, Perfecto, who on the horse looks like a centaur, the image that represents Set's father, severs Set's bond with his father through his act of unmitigated violence and terror. It is certainly reasonable to assume Set has shared his paintings and images and their interpretation with Grey. Thus Grey, in manipulating the images and symbols that are haunting Set, along with his obsession about his father, may be hoping to break that bond, to substitute her own epistemology (way of knowing) and teleology (design in nature) for his. For instance, Grey has already isolated him into a world of women, and the first man he encounters in a while looks like the image he has created of his father, but this man savagely attacks him with a bear's claw. He naturally becomes enraged and delirious. It is a simple thing for Grey to convince him he turned into a bear, or at least that the spirit of the bear came over him, and that without her, he is a senseless and enraged animal subject to a power that he cannot control, but she can. He must therefore submit to her and her secret wisdom as a medicine woman to be able to live at least the semblance of a normal life.

Perfecto Atole deserves some comment. The reader cannot help but compare him with the albino, Juan Reyes Fragua, in *House Made of Dawn*. They are both described as snakelike and innately threatening, as well as overtly sexual. There is also the serious implication of sexual history between Juan and Abel because Abel stabs Juan "deep into the groin" instead of, for instance, the heart or belly or neck (78). Perhaps Juan molested Abel as a child, certainly Perfecto's "taking" of the "girl's virginity" is improper. Grey's subtle accusation of how improper Perfecto's behavior toward her is also indicated in her reference to yellow ribbons, green M and Ms, and pretty red boots in his seduction of her (282). Therefore, how can he be instrumental in the "healing" of Set? Does Grey really love Set? Set, like Perfecto, is a middle-aged man. Set is 44 and Grey is only 19. Somehow, that just does not seem healthy. Especially considering Grey's history of being sexually abused by older men, and the absence of her own father—who would be approximately Set's age. Therefore, it is not unwarranted to speculate that Grey, in her collection of middle-aged men as her lovers, Perfecto Atole, Worcester Meat, and Set, is, in a way, searching for her own absent father. In and of itself, the age difference may not be damning, although it is certainly suspect, but combined with all the other problematic elements in Grey's life it makes the relationship between Set and Grey very inappropriate and dangerous to both.

Grey's own life story indicates why she needs Set to be dependent on her, and why she needs to be in control. Grey has experienced many traumatic sexual experiences in her young life. Her first sexual experience was the result of manipulation by an older man, Perfecto Atole, instead of mutual self discovery between young people who think they are in love. Further, Grey does not have the opportunity to have sex lovingly with the young man she wants to have a meaningful relationship with, Murphy Dicks, but instead she uses the excuse of trading sex for a horse to have sex with him. Of course, his subsequent bragging about the exchange to his father, and probably to his friends, leads directly to the father of the young man, Dwight Dicks, brutally raping her. She subsequently follows Murphy Dicks to where he is attending college, Oklahoma State University, perhaps to tell him what his father did or the real reason she had sex with him was because she loved him. However, instead of a relationship she finds only rejection and further humiliation. All of these things add up to create a state of mind in which she needs to dominate, and to be in control of the man or men she has sex with in order to feel safe. She is barely more than a child herself. She is playing at a very dangerous game despite her sexual experiences, and the unreliable narrator's enchantment with her. In the end, she loses control and Set dies or disappears. Either way, she ends up one more single

Native American mother with a fatherless child, Grey re-imagines Dwight Dicks raping her as an incident in which she gains control of the situation and her body. While Dwight Dicks is raping her she is imagining that she is making love with Billy the Kid, then she is brought forcefully to the dirty floor of the stable:

In an instant her intense pleasure was turned into pain, concentrated and excruciating. A burst of brilliant red light flashed upon her closed eyes, She screamed in pain. Her eyes burst open. The face above her was red and swollen and dripping sweat. In that instant she saw the face of Bob Olinger (a deputy who brutalized Billy the Kid), but in the next she beheld the huge transported head of Dwight Dicks . . . She was nearly blind with rage and desperation and hurt. And already there was in her the seed of sorrow, well below the level of articulate indignation, let alone rage, that would be with her the rest of her life. In that one moment she became almost the personification of hatred, like Olinger, more stricken and diseased with hatred than she could have believed possible. In this unspeakable happening she was forced for the first time to a hatred of the world, of herself, of life itself. (97)

First, she imagines that her horse, Dog, tramples Dwight, then she imagines that Billy shoots Dwight, then she imagines she circumcises him. The first two are obviously products of her imagination, but some readers think that she actually manages to circumcise Dwight. The problem with that interpretation is that it simply does not make sense. Think for a moment about the condition she is in. If, for instance, she were able to somehow manipulate Dwight into a position so she could physically get the upper hand, why would she simply circumcise him? Would not the "almost personification of hatred" kill Dwight or castrate him if she had the opportunity? That seems certain. Therefore, the circumcision makes symbolic sense, but not literal sense. Circumcision is a sign of submission. It was originally intended to mark a man's submission to God. Grey's imagining that she manages to circumcise Dwight is, in effect, her figuratively taking back what was stolen from her. It is important to recall that one of the storyteller's purposes, at least as it is elucidated by Catlin Setrman, is to put the world in order.

Later, she has an equally unlikely exchange of words with Dwight when she is dreaming that she is riding her horse naked around rural Oklahoma carrying a spear:

In the distance, in a cloud of dust, Grey reined in, and Dog squatted on his haunches, his hooves cutting furrows in the earth. She turned him sharply and set him racing back. She

stretched out at full speed, and she leaned her lithe, naked body forward, her hair flowing . . . her thighs taut, her toes curled, her breasts bobbing in the wind. And she screamed and held the lance high. Dwight Dicks, who was beside the barn ... stood up, rigid, his eyes and mouth wide open. Grey reined in again, and Dog came skidding to a halt. The she walked him up close to Dwight. She sat naked above the great, red, dumbfounded man, her coppery body glowing with sweat, her breasts heaving, the unearthly turtle mask tilted downward, looking into his stricken soul.

'Hey, Dwight.'

'Hey, Miz Grey,' said Dwight faintly.

'Nice day, ain't it?' the turtle said.

'Yes'm, shore is,' Dwight said, trying hard no to smile, smiling feebly.

'Say, Dwight, how's your injured member?' the turtle inquired.

'Please, ma'am?'

'Your cock, Dwight.'

'Oh, it's fine, Miz Grey, thank you.'

The mask nodded to him, and Grey turned her horse and walked away, her round buttocks jiggling above the sheen of Dog's long black tail. (199-200)

Then there is a short excerpt from her book about Billy the Kid, and the next moment, "moonlight poured in the window of the grandmother's room. Grey lay asleep on the bed, one of the grandmother's shawls across her legs" (210), Obviously, her mad, naked ride and bizarre conversation with Dwight was all a dream. Also, remember, it is only in her imagination that she is "lithe." It is even questionable if her book about Billy the Kid really exists or if it, too, is just in her head. For example, earlier it is shown that "words fail her," and "she knew what she wanted to say, but she could not say it in writing" (185). The narrator informs the reader that "sometimes she would sit over her notebook for hours, and nothing would come of it, and tears would fill her eyes" (186). She wonders if it is "Billy who is articulate, or [i]s it she?" (192). Is there a book, and is she writing it, or is another personality writing it? The text does not provide a clear answer.

Also, Grey is not a powerful medicine woman. Grey tells Set to lay his hands in the sand and snow and to sing to the earth and the high Rio Arriba plateau would do him good. But, Set gets sicker: "He broke out

then into a cold sweat, and his whole body quaked. On his hands and knees on the shoulder of the road he had never felt worse. He was tearing, drooling vomit, weak and humiliated. He wanted to die" (276). When Grey puts her hands on him, he tears away. She continues to tell him it is just the spirit of the bear awakening, but "there on the high plateau of Rio Arriba he would have given anything to hear Bent's voice again-and across some unfathomable chasm of time his father's" (277). Also, when she looks into her mind she wants to see her grandmother Kopemah, but she sees "instead the face of Annie Oakley or that of Emily Dickinson" (194). She "imagined herself Sister Blandina or Saint Teresa or Joan of Arc" (194). Although she looks at her rough hands and thinks they are the hands of a medicine woman, she immediately imagines she is Sister Blandina, sitting on a small chair "regarding] her delicate white hands" (195). She is demonstrating, not the complete and secure sense of self that characterizes mature medicine people, but the classic psychic trauma of a victim of colonization that the psychotherapist Frantz Fanon describes afflicting his native Algerians following French occupation in his follow-up book to *The Wretched of the Earth*, *Black Faces: White Masks*. In *Black Faces: White Masks*, Fanon discusses the insidious phenomenon of the colonization of the mind. Linda Hogan has a similar phenomenon adumbrated metaphorically in her poem "The Truth Is". Grey is obviously afflicted with some type of schizophrenia and Set appears to be suffering from severe depression, or more probably, bipolar disorder. However, this is masked because they are *Indians* in an *Indian* novel: Not representations of the real-life experiences of real-life people. How many young Native American men and women drink, use drugs, and engage in violence and other self-destructive behavior because they are trying to be *Indian* instead of human beings?

Grey's condition was precipitated by sexual violence. Set's condition, likewise, was precipitated by sexual violence at the Peter and Paul Home when he was a child, and further exacerbated by the loss of his mother, father, adopted father, and, finally, the prospect of becoming a father himself. Grey and Set seek mythic solutions to contemporary real-life problems, and they fail. It does them no service for literary critics to romanticize the real-life problems that real-life men and women are struggling with every day. Turning into a bear or becoming a powerful medicine woman are simply not options for most Native American young men and women living in modern America. It is important to read the story metaphorically (a sophisticated use of language that represents more than words are capable of representing in and of themselves) and realistically.

Of course, this is not to say that psychiatry offers any ready solutions. Abel, it should be recalled, did spend some time in a psychiatric hospital after he killed Juan:

The walls of his cell were white, or perhaps they were grey; he could not remember. After a while he could not imagine anything beyond the walls.

.. the essential character of the walls consisted not in their substance but in their appearance, the bare one dimensional surface that was white, perhaps, or grey, or green. (Momaday, *House* 97)

Instead of healing there is further dehumanizing and anesthetizing. Larson notes, "The fact that he cannot remember the color of his cell is indicative of his general anaesthetized state" (83) Set, too, had psychiatric treatment, but beyond labeling, nothing is done to alleviate his condition: "He is dangerously self-centered" (Momaday, *Ancient* 235).

I wish there were a simple solution as Silko asserts in *Ceremony*. For instance, that a person can enter mythic time, that there are mythic beings who live and are willing to help, like the goddess Tseh helps Tayo, and that all the ills we experience are the result of witchery; that we can control the witchery through rediscovery of traditional, albeit updated, healing ceremonies and rituals, but many of us, like Michael Dorris (Modoc), do not believe that is possible. Michael Dorris wrote in his essay "The Myth of Justice":

Where did we get the idea that life is ultimately fair? Who promised that there was a balance to things, a yin and yang that perfectly cancels each other out, a divine score sheet that makes sure that all the totals eventually ring even? Who exactly reaps what they sow? Does everything that goes around come around? If that's some people's experience, I haven't met them, and my guess is, if they still believe it, they simply haven't lived long enough to know better. (464)

Dorris endorses the Nootka description of reality as one in which we had better look out for ourselves because "things simply happen without structure or divine • plan" (467). For example, in their creation story a trickster in the guise of a Raven eats too many purple berries, and suffering from severe diarrhea defecates all over the earth, and that is the origin of people. Poignantly and pungently, he says if we live as if there were divine beings to look out for us we "like the ground beneath the circling trickster, will never know what hit us" (468).

Why does Abel run at the end of *House Made of Dawn*? For that matter, why is he running at the beginning? Because running is all there is: "He was running and there was no reason to run but the running itself. . ." (191). Why does Set disappear into the woods at the conclusion of *The Ancient Child*? Just as importantly, why do most critics view the

endings as happy? Susan Scarberry-Garci, for example, was so bold as to title her book on Momaday's fiction *Landmarks of Healing*.

Momaday's novels, like the storyteller's Bear-Boy story in *The Ancient Child*, certainly may "soothe and comfort," but that is only a superficial interpretation of them. The real story, the Truth as Tosamah would say, is underneath, hidden below the fat, but not readily discoverable. *The Ancient Child* is a sophisticated syncretic novel that reveals startling truths about the Native American experience and about literature by and about Native Americans.

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