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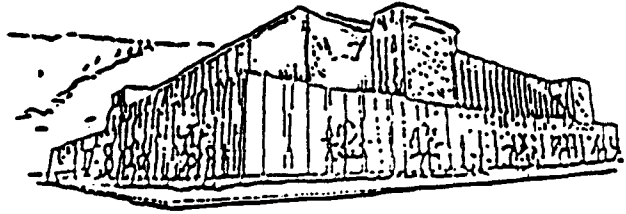
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**SACRED LANGUAGE, SACRED LAND:
JOURNEYS IN AND AROUND THE BLACK HILLS**

by

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for the degree of

Master of Arts

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2000

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**SACRED LANGUAGE, SACRED LAND:
JOURNEYS IN AND AROUND THE BLACK HILLS**

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Thanks also go to Brady Harrison, who gave me the freedom to focus on the Black Hills during my studies of critical theory; and to Dan Flores, who provided invaluable guidance in my historical research.

Finally, a thousand thanks to Matt Burkhardt, Tammie Smith, and Colleen O'Brien for their friendship and encouragement.

Once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth, I believe. He ought to give himself up to a particular landscape in his experience, to look at it from as many angles as he can, to wonder about it, to dwell upon it. He ought to imagine that he touches it with his hands at every season and listens to the sounds that are made upon it. He ought to imagine the creatures there and all the faintest motions of the wind. He ought to recollect the glare of noon and all the colors of the dawn and dusk.

--N. Scott Momaday
from *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, p. 83

**SACRED LANGUAGE, SACRED LAND:
JOURNEYS IN AND AROUND THE BLACK HILLS**

Introduction

I first encountered the region of the Black Hills in the writings of N. Scott Momaday. This is a landscape that the Kiowas considered sacred because it was inspired with their stories. "Where words and place come together, there is the sacred," Momaday notes in *The Man Made of Words* (111). Momaday's description of Devils Tower and of his peoples' relationship to it so captivated me that I have felt compelled to visit it again and again. I have tried--I am still trying--to look upon it as Momaday recommended: to come to know its contours and colors in every season and every hour. I have visited the tower at dawn, dusk, and midafternoon; in the busy tourist season of high summer, the cool quiet of autumn, and the peaceful desolation of winter. On my last visit, I stood shin-deep in snow at the tower's base, watching the light of sundown bleach the shadows out of the tower's columns. I was the only human being there--an odd sensation for a displaced New Yorker. A young buck eyed me warily as a herd of deer moved among the trees. I scooped a handful of

powder from the surface of a boulder, lifted it to my face, and inhaled the bright, metallic fragrance of snow.

While I was enthralled with the beauty of the Black Hills, I could not travel through them without recognizing that Devils Tower is just one very dramatic feature of the region's complicated physical and cultural landscape. Just as the Black Hills once informed the identity of the Kiowas, the hills today inform the identity of the Sioux, who were among its Native American occupants at the time that white forces assumed control of the area. The Black Hills are sacred to the Sioux, but the Sioux have no legal hold over the land today.

The following three essays are stories of journeys in and around the region of the Black Hills. The first, "Sacred Language, Sacred Land: Identity in the Stories of N. Scott Momaday," is an exploration of the relationship between language, landscape, and identity, as that relationship is played out in Momaday's stories and in the political scene of the Black Hills today. In the second, "'The Gods They Have Become': Mount Rushmore and America's Icons of Empire," I examine the official literature of "America's Shrine of Democracy" against the context of our cultural identity and the region's problematic history. The final piece, "Blanket of Sky," is a story of a personal pilgrimage to Wounded Knee, which lies along the outskirts of the Black Hills on South Dakota's Pine Ridge Reservation. These essays were written to stand independently of one another, so some minor repetitions essential to the issues of language and landscape occur throughout the series.

Momaday begins his memoir, *The Names*, by recalling the storytelling techniques of a Kiowa elder named Pohd-Lohk. “When Pohd-Lohk told a story, he began by being quiet. Then he said, ‘Ah-keah-de,’ ‘They were camping,’ and he said it every time. I have tried,” Momaday says, “to write in the same way, in the same spirit. Imagine: They were camping” (i).

My aspirations are not quite so mystical. These essays are based on personal journeys, and they reek of gasoline. I have begun each of them in the same way. I was driving. Imagine: I was driving.

There are things in nature that engender an awful quiet in the heart of man; Devils Tower is one of them. Two centuries ago, because they could not do otherwise, the Kiowas made a legend at the base of the rock. My grandmother said:

Eight children were there at play, seven sisters and their brother. Suddenly the boy was struck dumb; he trembled and began to run upon his hands and feet. His fingers became claws, and his body was covered with fur. Directly there was a bear where the boy had been. The sisters were terrified; they ran, and the bear after them. They came to the stump of a great tree, and the tree spoke to them. It bade them climb upon it, and as they did so it began to rise into the air. The bear came to kill them, but they were just beyond its reach. It reared against the tree and scored the bark all around with its claws. The seven sisters were borne into the sky, and they became the stars of the Big Dipper.

From that moment, and so long as the legend lives, the Kiowas have kinsmen in the night sky.

--N. Scott Momaday
from *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, p. 8

**SACRED LANGUAGE, SACRED LAND:
IDENTITY IN THE STORIES OF N. SCOTT MOMADAY**

Introduction: The Way to Devils Tower

Drive west across South Dakota and you know for miles that Devils Tower is coming. You know this not because you can see the tower silhouetted against the horizon (you can't--it's 30-odd miles north of the interstate, tucked away in the Black Hills), but because the landscape along I-90 is pocked with billboards advertising various local attractions: Wall Drug, Mount Rushmore, Wind and Jewel Caves, Devils Tower, and the Flintstones theme park, to name just a few. I didn't visit Devils Tower because of those billboards or because of anything I'd read in a guidebook. I went to Devils Tower because I'd read about that landmark in N. Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain*.

Devils Tower rises skyward in eastern Wyoming, in the western-most portion of the Black Hills. It was our country's first National Monument, so designated by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1906 with his first official invocation of the Antiquities Act. It is a landmark which figures prominently in the Kiowa stories Momaday recounts, and in Kiowa tribal identity.

Recalling his own pilgrimage along the ancient migration route of his Kiowa ancestors, Momaday writes, in his introduction to *The Way to Rainy Mountain*: “At the top of a ridge I caught sight of Devils Tower upthrust against the gray sky as if in the birth of time the core of the earth had broken through its crust and the motion of the world was begun” (8). After the level topography of the plains, and even among the shady, inviting curves of the Black Hills, Devils Tower looks like a miracle made manifest in stone. “There are things in nature that engender an awful quiet in the heart of man; Devils Tower is one of them,” Momaday reflects (*The Way to Rainy Mountain* 8). “Awful” is the operative word here, if we consider it in its pure sense of “inspiring awe.” When we look at Devils Tower, it is easy to understand why it provoked early peoples to imagine stories of cataclysmic terror and energy, and why, when they looked upon it, they felt that they were face to face with the sacred.

Geologically, Devils Tower is something of a mystery; scientists are uncertain whether the tower we see today is the neck of a volcano or simply what remains of an upsurge of molten rock. What we do know is that the tower is made of phonolite porphyry, and that the striking columns that cover its surface--the bear claw marks that the Kiowas recognized--formed as the molten rock cooled and crystallized. The tower did not burst through the surface of the earth. Rather, it assumed its distinctive form 1000 feet underground, some 60 million years ago, and was gradually revealed as the Belle Fourche River eroded the surrounding landscape. Today, Devils Tower stands 867 feet tall, and is roughly 1,200 feet above the river (Norton 8).

RYAN 6

When I rounded a bend in the road and caught sight of the tower for the first time, I felt the special thrill of stepping into a story--as if I, too, were following the old Kiowa footpath, even though I was driving on asphalt. When I reached the tower, I found it was mobbed with the customary throngs of summer tourists armed with cameras and binoculars. Cars and tour buses crammed the two small parking lots adjacent to the Visitors Center. It was a sweltering afternoon in late July. I scrambled onto one of the boulders alongside the path at the base of the tower and stretched out. Above me, I could see the black forms of turkey vultures circling the tower, and colorful dots of climbers inching toward its teardrop-shaped top. The juxtaposition of the two images evoked memories of scenes from old westerns, when the desert wanderers, desperate with thirst, would look up to find buzzards trailing their path.

Gradually, I was drawn into a conversation with an elderly woman who was seated on a nearby rock. She was waiting for a friend who was hiking the paved footpath that encircles the tower. The woman told me she had spent the last several weeks teaching at a summer Bible camp. "Are you a Christian?" she asked me. I nodded, but she continued to stare expectantly at me, so after a moment, I blurted, "Yes." And then I bristled, knowing what was coming next.

"Tell me about your experience with the Lord."

It was an intimate question to put to a stranger, and I cringed. I knew the woman meant no harm, but I was annoyed by her forwardness. "That's very

personal,” I answered. “I’d rather not discuss it.” But as I reflect back on that incident, her question, taken in the broader context of encountering spirit and what we believe to be sacred, seems appropriate. We were, after all, on sacred ground, although I wasn’t thinking much about anything sacred in that unholy heat, after six or eight hours of driving. The landscape of Devils Tower is sacred to the Kiowas because it is infused with their stories; the landmark is a feature of their cultural history. “Where words and place come together, there is the sacred,” Momaday notes in *The Man Made of Words* (111). Devils Tower is a sacred site within a region--the Black Hills--that is sacred to approximately two dozen Native American tribes. This issue of sacredness is one of the reasons why cases involving Devils Tower and the entire region of the Black Hills have bounced in and out of the court system for the last 100 years.

What’s in a Name: The Identity of the Storyteller

In his memoir *The Names*, Momaday relates that, when he was six months old, he was taken to a tribal gathering behind the home of his Kiowa grandmother. The gathering was something like a baptism or naming ceremony; it was, in effect, a kind of consecration. Pohd-Lohk, a tribal elder and storyteller, recounted the history of the Kiowas’ migration from the mountains to the plains. He recalled, too, the story of their encounter with Devils Tower, which the Kiowas know as *Tsoai*--Rock Tree. When he had finished speaking, Pohd-Lohk clasped the infant and said, “Now

you are, *Tsoai-Talee*,” giving Navarre Scott Momaday the Kiowa name of Rock Tree Boy (*The Names* 57). “Pohd-Lohk believed that a man’s life proceeds from his name in the way that a river proceeds from its source,” Momaday recalls (*The Names* i). Momaday’s body of work unquestionably proceeds from his Kiowa name.

“[Momaday] would come to believe that he is, in significant ways, the boy of the [Devils Tower] story,” comments the author’s friend and colleague, Charles Woodard. “He would come to believe that the story forever connects him and his people to each other and to the seamless, intricately related physical world, and that it identifies his being and his circumstance within that world” (Woodard 3).

It was during this naming ceremony that Momaday was charged with the responsibility of recalling to his people the stories of their origins. For Momaday, storytelling is more than a passion; it is a vocation. “A word has power in and of itself,” Momaday observes in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. “It comes from nothing into sound and meaning; it gives origin to all things....And the word is sacred” (33). In a subsequent conversation with Charles Woodard, he notes, “There are the responsibilities that were attendant upon the 19th century man in an oral tradition. He knew quite well 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....He did not deceive with words. That was bad--there were consequences involved” (Woodard 100).

Acts of Imagination: Language, Landscape, and Identity

“Notions of the past and future are essentially notions of the present,”

Momaday remarks in *The Names*. “In the same way, an idea of one’s ancestry and posterity is really an idea of the self” (97). Identity, then, proceeds not only from a name (such as Rock Tree Boy), but also from the stories of one’s culture. What we learn from Momaday’s account of the Kiowas’ story of the origins of Devils Tower/Rock Tree is that the Kiowas had a strong sense of tribal identity which was linked to the physical world and to the stories they created to explain natural phenomena. It is a *tree* which calls to the sisters and ultimately delivers them to sanctuary in the *sky*. They become the *sister stars* of the Big Dipper—permanent fixtures above the *earth*. Their brother is both *boy* and *bear*. The sisters remain relatives of the Kiowas, even after they have taken up residence in the sky. Except for the forms of their physical manifestations, there is no differentiation between human beings and other animals or elements. What we observe in this story, we also find in the story of the naming of Rock Tree Boy—a sense of identity which is inseparable from both language and landscape. “[The Devils Tower] story, which I have known from the time I could first understand language, exemplifies the sacred for me,” Momaday reflects in *The Man Made of Words*. “The storyteller...succeeded in raising the human condition to the level of universal significance. Not only did he account for the existence of the rock tree, but in the process he related his people to the stars” (122).

In his introductory essay to *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, Momaday, through his memories of his grandmother's stories, gives his readers an intimate history of the Kiowas and describes their identification with the landscape of the American West. He relates the story of how their tribal identity evolved after they left their mountain origins in the Yellowstone country of Montana and migrated eastward to become a plains people. "The Kiowas reckoned their stature by the distance they could see, and they were bent and blind in the wilderness," Momaday writes. On the plains, however, they acquired horses, religion and "the sense of destiny, therefore courage and pride....They [became] a lordly and dangerous society of fighters and thieves, hunters and priests of the sun...."(6,7).

According to their stories, the Kiowas were literally born out of the earth. Momaday tells us that their original name, *Kwuda*, meant "the coming out people," and that they came to the surface of the world through a hollow log (*The Way to Rainy Mountain* 16). The metaphor is obvious: the log is the birth canal through which the mother earth delivered the Kiowas.

Momaday eloquently reiterates the connection between landscape and identity in the character of Abel in *House Made of Dawn*. In *Genesis*, Abel is the name of the first son of Adam, who was the first man and the son whom God formed out of the earth's dust. Abel's grandparents, then, were God and the earth. This is the symbolic lineage of the character of Abel in *House Made of Dawn*. In the novel, we learn that

Francisco, Abel's grandfather, had taught his grandsons to intimately know all the facets of their local landscape. "They must learn the whole contour of the black mesa. They must know it as they knew the shape of their hands, always and by heart" (*House Made of Dawn* 197). Later in the story, Abel, now a city-dweller, is beaten and left for dead. His hands are badly broken, and the image of his broken hands figures prominently in the rest of the story. He loses language; he doesn't speak again until he returns home. With the breaking of Abel's hands comes the symbolic severance of his connection to his landscape, and therefore, his identity. Without the use of his hands or voice, and with his attachment to his landscape broken, Abel is physically and spiritually *dis-abled*.

The Kiowas made sense of the physical world and defined their place within it through their stories. These stories are what Momaday would call "acts of imagination." When we read Momaday's writings or listen to his recordings, we come across that phrase--acts of imagination--repeatedly. "We are what we imagine ourselves to be," he observes in *The Man Made of Words* (39). It's an important point--we define ourselves by such "acts of imagination." In *House Made of Dawn*, Abel reclaims his health and his identity when he returns to his native landscape and imagines the generations of dawn runners who preceded him.

Dialogue between the Physical and Spiritual Worlds

In the Devils Tower story, we observe that the Kiowas engage in dialogue with the spiritual and physical worlds. To understand this concept we must

momentarily abandon the idea of religion and think simply in terms of spirit. “Indian languages had no word for ‘religion,’” notes J. Donald Hughes in *American Indian Ecology*. “They expressed the idea by something like the Isleta Pueblo term ‘life-way’ or ‘life-need’” (Hughes 138).

Momaday tells us that the physical world is infused with spirit. “Spirit is everywhere,” he notes in *Ancestral Voice*. “It informs all of nature...Everything is alive. The mountains are alive, the sun is alive, the stars are alive, the stones are alive. That whole network of spiritual vitality is there to be entered into by us creatures” (Woodard 201). That is why the tree can call to the girls, why the girls can become stars, and why the tree can petrify into *Tsoai*, Rock Tree. “Walking about or gliding in his canoe, a traditional Indian would be holding constant conversation with the sacred universe,” Hughes comments (Hughes 144). We find this same type of intimate dialogue occurring throughout the Lakota stories collected in Ella Deloria’s *Dakota Texts*.

The dialogue between humans/animals and the spiritual world is easily demonstrated in the Kiowas’ Devils Tower story. But we find it again, significantly, in the story of how the Kiowas adopted what Hughes would call their “life-way” of Tai-me, the figure of the sacred Sun Dance. Momaday tells us that

Long ago there were bad times. The Kiowas were hungry and there was no food. There was a man who heard his children cry from hunger, and he went out to look for food. He walked four days and became very weak. On the fourth day he came to a great canyon. Suddenly there was thunder and lightning. A voice spoke to him and said, “Why are you

following me? What do you want?" The man was afraid. *The thing standing before him had the feet of a deer, and its body was covered with feathers.* The man answered that the Kiowas were hungry. "Take me with you," the voice said, "and I will give you whatever you want." From that day Tai-me has belonged to the Kiowas (*The Way to Rainy Mountain* 36--italics mine).

I have highlighted the description of the hybrid creature because it calls to mind another hybrid I encountered during a visit to Devils Tower last fall. As I was checking into a motel in Sundance, Wyoming, I was startled by a mounted figure perched on the front desk in the lobby. It had the head and--more or less--the body of a rabbit, and chicken legs; a pair of antlers sprouted from its head. "Prairie chicken," the affable clerk offered by way of explanation. I looked up and saw that rows of mounted, antlered rabbit heads lined the wall behind the desk. According to a sign, they were 70 bucks a pop, and the motel would ship them anywhere in the world.

So much for conversation with our kindred creatures. Let me make it clear that I am not a vegetarian; I have eaten rabbit, chicken and venison, and I eat beef whenever I am lucky enough to get my teeth into a good piece of it. But I was horrified by this jigsaw taxidermy. This was supposed to be funny. It was as if the sacred figure of the Tai-me story had been reincarnated in a cruel joke.

The feathered ungulate that embodied, or led the Kiowas to, Tai-me (it's unclear from the story which of those roles this particular character played) isn't one we can recognize as easily as the boy/bear. We do recognize, though, the familiar theme of deliverance, which we also find in the Devils Tower story. Interestingly, the

themes of the Rock Tree story--transformation, redemption, and ascension into heaven--bear a startling resemblance to the Christian story of Jesus, even though the Kiowa story appears to pre-date Christian contact. *'Take me with you,' the voice said, 'and I will give you whatever you want.'* "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you," Jesus advised in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:7). The Tai-me messenger/deity manifests itself in a nonhuman form, but its message of comfort and deliverance resonates with a striking familiarity.

Losing Rights to the Sacred Lands

The Kiowas and their allies, the Crows, evidently left their sacred territory of the Black Hills sometime during the mid-1700's, when the Sioux muscled their way across and down the plains from what we now call Minnesota, displacing a number of tribes along their way (White 323). The Black Hills then became the sacred land of the Sioux.

The Sioux were the principal and most powerful occupants of the region when white settlers began to push through the area. The Black Hills, along with an enormous expanse of western territory, were deeded to the Sioux in the Treaty of 1868. In *Under Western Skies*, historian Donald Worster notes

The Treaty of 1868, signed at Fort Laramie on the North Platte River, established for the first time in history...a clear, precise set of boundaries for the Lakota and guaranteed them against all invaders, Indian and white alike. The treaty set up a Sioux reservation... 'set apart for the absolute

and undisturbed use and occupation of the Indians.' No part of that reservation could ever be given away, sold or traded without the written consent of at least three fourths of the adult males (Worster 119).

If any of the Sioux believed that their troubles with the whites were over after the treaty was signed, their peace of mind was short-lived. "All might have been well in the aftermath of the 1868 treaty had a Catholic priest, Jean de Smet, not ventured illegally into the Black Hills and afterwards reported to the *Sioux Falls Times* that he had discovered gold therein," writes Ward Churchill in *The Journal of Ethnic Studies* (Churchill 128). These reports of gold were confirmed by George Armstrong Custer in 1874, and mining interests and the military quickly invaded the area. The Sioux resisted the trespassers for a number of years, but their opposition was finally shattered in the Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890, when perhaps 300 or more of them died by the guns and cannons of the U.S. Cavalry. Today, the Sioux occupy some of the most economically-deprived regions of the United States.

The Sioux began court proceedings for the return of the Black Hills as early as 1903, but their efforts were unsuccessful until 1979, when the United States Supreme Court decided that the lands had been illegally seized, and awarded the tribe a cash settlement for the hills, plus interest dating back to 1877 (Worster 113). The Sioux, however, have refused to claim the money. The Black Hills, they insist, are sacred, and they want the land back. They approached Senator Bill Bradley, who for four years tried and failed to push through Congress a bill which would have returned control of a substantial portion of the region to the Sioux. (Worster 114).

Origins of Belief

Why the hills became sacred to the Sioux is somewhat unclear, as their stories do not specifically refer to that region; the Black Hills do not figure prominently in Ella Deloria's *Dakota Texts*. In writing of the various traditions surrounding the Black Hills, archaeologist Linea Sundstrom notes that "as groups entered a new area, they tended to adopt the sacred places of their predecessors as their own and to transfer pre-existing belief systems to these historically sacred locales" (Sundstrom 188). Since the Black Hills were already sacred to the Kiowas and several other tribes, the Sioux, as Sundstrom suggests, may have transferred their beliefs onto the sacred landscapes of their predecessors. This seems like a plausible explanation, but no evidence remains that the Sioux actually did this.

Nicolaus Black Elk, the Lakota shaman, recalls that he was taken to Harney Peak, the highest point in the Black Hills, during his first great vision. Black Elk refers to Harney Peak as the center of the earth, but he adds that anywhere can be the center of the earth. In *The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk's Teachings Given to John G. Niehardt*, Black Elk comments that the Oglala Sioux have a story of a warrior named Red Thunder, who was told by a Thunder-being of a race between the two- and four-legged creatures of the earth. The Thunder-being told the warrior that "the place where they had the race was the heart of the earth. He said, 'Someday your tribe will be in this land.' It was the promised land. 'This land is a *being*. Remember

in the future you are to look for this land.' I think," Black Elk adds, "at present time we found it and it is the Black Hills" (DeMallie 310).

It is significant that the Thunder-being refers to the land as a "being." This brings us back to Hughes's observation that the traditional Indian was engaged in "constant conversation with the sacred universe," and to Momaday's assertion that everything has spirit. We understand the word "being" to indicate that the land has spirit, and is an entity as sentient as the creatures who inhabit it. (It is also interesting to note that Black Elk, who eventually became a Christian, refers to the Black Hills with the same biblical term that the ancient Hebrews applied to Canaan).

But Black Elk's remarks do not answer the question as to why the Sioux consider the Black Hills their sacred territory. Donald Worster notes that during hearings on the Bradley Bill, Charlotte Black Elk, the great-granddaughter of Nicolaus Black Elk, testified that the Sioux lacked proof of the sacredness of the hills because their stories and cultural traditions had been severely repressed (Worster 148).

If the stories have indeed been lost, that is a tragedy, even though Momaday believes that every story, once uttered, exists in some other dimension (Woodard 120). But in the end, why the hills are sacred isn't really important. What matters is that the Sioux and other Native American tribes *believe* that the Black Hills are sacred. "Sacred ground is ground that is invested with belief," notes Momaday in *The*

Man Made of Words (114). And whether or not the Black Hills figured in the earliest stories of the Sioux is also unimportant. The region figures prominently in their history, and this landscape informs their identity as a people. “A crucial point,” Momaday observes, “[is] that the West was occupied [at the time of European contact]. It was the home of peoples who had come upon the North American continent many thousands of years before, who had in the course of their habitation become the spirit and intelligence of the earth, who had died into the ground again and again and so made it sacred” (*The Man Made of Words* 91). And in the years since white settlers first moved through the area, thousands of Sioux have “died into,” and for, the sacred ground of the Black Hills.

Faces of God, and the Abstraction of the Sacred

If the Sioux had raised the issue of the sanctity of the Black Hills back in the 1870’s, it seems unlikely that such protestations would have had much impact. Rather, such a declaration probably would have provided the settlers with additional evidence that the “pagan” natives were desperately in need of Christianizing. Because God wore a different face, His presence in the lives of the Native Americans (or in the Black Hills or elsewhere, for that matter) wasn’t recognized by the white settlers. “God and divinity for me are real, but I would not presume to define them,” Momaday tells Woodard in *Ancestral Voice* (Woodard 201). “‘Great Spirit,’ which is a concept we hear a lot in connection with the Indian, is probably a more precise term than ‘God,’ as I see it....[The words] get closer to the reality of a supernatural agent.”

This is a crucial point: God has more than one face. The majority of the early settlers could accept the Christian mystery of three persons in one God (Father, Son, Spirit), but not the idea that God has more than one face. “The sacred,” Momaday writes, “finally transcends definition. The mind does not comprehend it; it is at last to be recognized and acknowledged in the heart and soul. Those who seek to study or understand the sacred in academic terms are misled. The sacred is not a discipline. It is a dimension beyond the ordinary, beyond the mechanics of analysis. For those who come to the sacred, it is a kind of mystical experience, a deep and singular encounter” (*The Man Made of Words* 114). His remarks call to mind the words of naturalist/philosopher Jack Turner, who laments the reduction of wilderness and wild places to grids and boxes and pages of statistics. “My enemies are abstractions, abstractions that are rendering even the wild abstract,” Turner fumes in the introduction to *The Abstract Wild*. “Thus diminished,” he continues, “wilderness becomes a special unit of property treated like a historic relic or ruin--a valuable remnant” (Turner 86).

In the last decade or so, the National Park Service has taken to sending ethnographers to the sacred sites within its areas of authority. The Park Service has charged the ethnographers with the task of examining the cultures and traditions associated with these areas, so that the agency can come up with management plans which respect the traditions of indigenous peoples. While the sentiment behind such

efforts seems well-intentioned, we run the risk of objectifying and rendering abstract the people and traditions under study. For example, the archaeologist Linea Sundstrom, in her studies of the Black Hills, refers to the stories of the region as “data.” Author Muriel Crespi uses the same word in an article describing the information gathered by the Park Service’s ethnographers (Crespi 18). If the stories are sacred, as Momaday maintains, then they are analogous to the sacred scriptures more familiar to western cultures. How can they be labeled “data?” Are the writings in the Bible, the Torah, and the Koran “data?”

I agree with Jack Turner’s assertion that we shouldn’t reduce the wild to paper abstractions, just as I recognize the inherent danger of objectification and abstraction in our studies of other cultures. But that doesn’t mean that we should stop looking and listening. If we forget the data, we forsake any hope we have of preserving what remains of the wild. If we abandon these ethnographic studies, we revert to the white patriarchy we inherited from our forefathers--a patriarchy that worshipped money and power in the name of God.

The National Park Service drew fire from commercial climbing guides in 1995, when it implemented a new climbing management plan for Devils Tower. The agency asked park-goers to “voluntarily” refrain from climbing during the month of June, when the Sioux and other Native American tribes hold religious rites, including the sacred Sun Dance, at Devils Tower. It also placed a ban on licenses for

commercial climbing guides during June. Local climbing guides sued, and in 1996, a federal judge prohibited the Park Service from enacting the ban on commercial licenses, but upheld the rest of the plan. But some individual and commercial climbers, as well as the Bear Lodge Multiple Use Association, objected even to this toothless policy, and appealed the decision, maintaining that the policy was “‘clearly coercive’ and violated the constitutionally required separation of church and state” (Asseo 2). On 27 March 2000, the climbers lost their appeal when the Supreme Court decided that the National Park service may continue to “discourage rock-climbing on Devils Tower National Monument...when American Indians hold sacred ceremonies [there]” (Asseo 2).

According to the Indian Law Resource Center, climbing at the tower during the month of June has dropped by more than 80% since 1995 (www.indianlaw.org). While this may be good news for the Native American population of the Black Hills, it's bad news for the climbing guides, and they are not likely to let the matter rest. The controversies surrounding Devils Tower and the Black Hills are far from over. The Sioux have demonstrated remarkable tenacity by struggling for nearly 100 years to regain legal authority over the Black Hills. Why should they give up now? And there is a highly vocal anti-government faction in the west--and elsewhere--whose proponents see any restrictions of our use of our national forests and parks as an infringement upon their constitutional right to drive snowmobiles and ATVs into fragile backcountry ecosystems.

Momaday's remarks about landscape, stories and cultural identity are eloquently encapsulated in a comment made by Arvol Looking Horse, a spiritual leader of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, in the April 1999 newsletter of the Indian Law Resource Center: "When climbers hammer objects into the butte, it is like they are pounding stakes into our bodies" (www.indianlaw.org). The equation is real; the same patterns we observe in the Kiowa stories are echoed in the voice of this man. Looking Horse's poignant words speak of an identity so deeply rooted in the lore and shape of the landscape that the man and the mountain are of one body, one mind.

This history of the West, that is, the written story that begins with the record of European intervention, is informed by tensions which arise from a failure to see the west in terms of the sacred....When Europeans came into the West, they encountered a people who had been there for untold millenia, for whom landscape was a kind of cathedral of their spiritual life, the home of their deepest belief. It had been earned by sacrifice forever. But the encounter was determined by a distortion of image and imagination and language, by a failure to see and believe.

--N. Scott Momaday
from *The Man Made of Words*, p. 106

**“THE GODS THEY HAVE BECOME”:
MOUNT RUSHMORE
AND AMERICA’S ICONS OF EMPIRE**

Introduction

During a recent visit to the Black Hills, I stopped at Devils Tower. It was early morning and my friend and I were lingering in the ranger station/bookstore when we overheard the exasperated voice of a small boy. “I want to see the *big heads*,” he complained to his parents, adding, as a warning, “*I’m losing patience.*” He was, of course, referring to Mount Rushmore National Monument, located 125 miles east of Wyoming’s Devils Tower, and just outside of South Dakota’s Rapid City.

I understood the boy’s feelings; I’d wanted to see Mount Rushmore ever since, as a child, I’d come across the big heads in a pop-up book. I pulled a paper lever and the mountain suddenly unfolded into the faces of four presidents. “If you like heads you’ll get your quota way out there in South Dakota,” the book promised. Since my family lived in New Jersey and my parents enjoyed traveling about as much as going to the dentist, the odds of visiting the monument seemed pretty slim. But I finally got my first chance some 30 years later, on my way back to Montana after a drive across the country.

It was summer, and I'd slept briefly and badly in a roach motel in Badlands National Park. I rose early, promising myself I'd never again make such a trip without packing camping gear, and drove through the park as the sun rose over the jagged rock formations. A few hours later I was driving through Keystone, a small kitsch-ville filled with the touristy accoutrements that disfigure a town. Old western-style storefronts housed shops marketing typical souvenirs--maps, flags, presidential key chains, plastic place mats, and ugly coffee mugs, I imagined. I was disgusted. “Why are you doing this?” I asked myself, crabby after two days of driving, broken sleep and a steady diet of road food and rice cakes. “Why do you want to see this thing?” After all, I'd slept through most history classes while growing up, and I could no longer remember which presidents, other than Lincoln and Washington, were carved into the mountain. Then I rounded a bend and immediately pulled onto the shoulder, stunned by the four sculpted faces--Washington, Jefferson, Roosevelt, and Lincoln--looking out at me.

What's so striking about that first glimpse of Mount Rushmore is that the heads look almost as if they belong there. Close-up photos betray the colossal dimensions of the sculptures; each head, from chin to crown, measures 60 feet. But from the roadside, it is the mountain itself which is enormous, and the presidential portraits are no greater in size than the mountain's other characteristics. These unexpected human features on the face of nature have, however, an eerie stability,

rather than the transient presence we are accustomed to glimpsing in shapes we find in, say, clouds. The sculptures were blasted out of granite; from the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, they stare eastward, across America.

A Complicated Story

Open some of the literature on Mount Rushmore, and you’ll find an official version of the monument’s complicated story. Reading T.D. Griffith’s *The Four Faces of Freedom*, I am uncomfortably reminded of Milan Kundera’s *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, in which history is rewritten by the governing regime in a sanitized, official version.

“Standing on a rocky ridge in the Black Hills of South Dakota,” writes Griffith, “you survey a scene of wonder. Around you, the summer wind dances and sings through ponderosa pines. A lone eagle circles overhead, riding the warm currents of air rising from the ridge. You are in the sacred land of the Sioux, surrounded by some of the oldest mountains on earth” (Griffith 5). That’s about the last time a reader encounters the Sioux in *The Four Faces of Freedom*. Griffith may point out that the visitor is in their “sacred land,” but he fails to add that this land, officially deeded to the Sioux in the Treaty of 1868, was illegally seized during the gold fever of the 1870’s, when miners invaded the region and the Homestake Mining Company set up works to cull gold out of the Black Hills.

Incidentally, Homestake, which is still one of North America’s largest gold producers, was one of the monument’s first official sponsors, contributing \$5,000 at

the project’s inception in 1927. That gift was matched by Charles Rushmore, a New York attorney who had earlier visited the Black Hills on behalf of the mining interests who employed him, and who so charmed the locals that they named a mountain in his honor before he returned home (Hilburn 9).

The Marxist critic Louis Althusser would probably call Mount Rushmore an Ideological State Apparatus. “Ideology has a material existence,” he writes in “Ideology and the State” (Althusser 56). In the case of Mount Rushmore, the ideology is made manifest in the sculptures of those four particular presidents, the surrounding facilities--including a polished Visitors Center and amphitheatre--and promotional literature, such as Griffith’s *The Four Faces of Freedom*.

New historicist critic Stephen Greenblatt writes that it is a culture’s works of art that evoke a sense of resonance and wonder. “It will be eas[y] to grasp the concepts of resonance and wonder,” Greenblatt writes,

if we think of the way in which our culture presents to itself not the textual traces of its past, but the surviving visual traces, for the latter are put on display in galleries and museums specially designed for the purpose. By resonance I mean the power of the object displayed to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged and for which as metaphor...it may be taken by a viewer to stand. By wonder I mean the power of the object displayed to stop the viewer in his tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke *an exalted attention* (Greenblatt 276-277. Italics mine).

If we apply Greenblatt’s comments to Mount Rushmore, we find that our culture--through the managing agency of the National Park Service, whose domain

includes national monuments--presents this memorial as a symbol, or metaphor, of democracy and freedom. The literature makes that point clear; indeed, the monument's official moniker is “America's Shrine of Democracy.” And Mount Rushmore certainly has the power to “stop the viewer in his tracks,” as it halted me in mine (and several other travellers in theirs--we were creating a traffic hazard), and “to evoke an exalted attention.” The words “shrine” and “exalted” are troubling because they elicit images of the Almighty Himself, but that, evidently, is exactly what the sculptor had in mind. “The idea,” Greenblatt continues, “is not to find outside the work of art some rock onto which...interpretation can be securely chained but rather to situate the work in relation to other representational practices operative in the culture at a given moment in both its history and our own” (Greenblatt 277). In the case of Mount Rushmore, the monument's sculptor and his backers had every intention of chaining interpretation to a particular rock in an attempt to promote an official version of history for present and future generations. In order to understand these “representational practices,” we need to examine the history of Mount Rushmore National Monument.

Breaking the Chains of Interpretation

The memorial was originally the brainchild of Doane Robinson, South Dakota's state historian, who was looking for a way to boost tourism and bolster his state's lagging economy. Robinson wanted a monument carved in a section of the

Black Hills known as The Needles--which is now included in Custer State Park--and he envisioned a monument to heroes of western lore, including such figures as Buffalo Bill, Lewis and Clark, and the Sioux Chief, Red Cloud. Robinson approached the renowned sculptor Gutzon Borglum. Although Robinson is officially deemed “The Father of Mount Rushmore,” it is at this point that his name seems to fade from the story, overwhelmed by the domineering presence of the sculptor. The artist was enthusiastic about the project, but, writes C.J. Hadley in *The Saturday Evening Post*, “[Borglum] also considered Robinson’s ideas of carving western legends too narrow” (Hadley 82). It’s entirely possible that Borglum was put off by the idea of carving the portrait of a Native American. Borglum was, in fact, a racist who was a member of the KKK (Heard 17). He came to Robinson’s attention because he was engaged in carving a mountainside frieze memorializing the south’s Civil War heroes for the United Daughters of the Confederacy; his plan for the frieze included a KKK altar. (Borglum was eventually dismissed from that project, and his work was destroyed by his successor). At any rate, Borglum was after something bigger than Robinson’s western legends.

‘The Gods They Have Become’

“[Borglum] would mount an undertaking worthy of the pioneer spirit of America,” Griffith writes, “and leave a work of art exceeding if not only in size, but in meaning, the Great Sphinx of Egypt, the mysterious statues of the Easter Islands,

and England’s Stonehenge” (Griffith 10). It’s at this point that Griffith’s booklet takes a decidedly arrogant turn. If the Sphinx, the Easter Island statues and the slabs of Stonehenge are still “mysterious” to us, how can we assume that we, or anyone, can create something that exceeds their meaning, if we don’t know for certain what that meaning is? Further, environmental historian Clive Ponting has theorized that the monumental works at Easter Island were religious symbols constructed by two early competitive societies which, in their race to “out-worship” one another, deforested and thus destroyed their environment; this led to the eventual collapse of their civilization. Finally, if we assume that those early works were, in some way, inherently religious, how can we assume that the granite busts of these human heads “exceed their meaning”? Some of us can’t, but apparently some of us still can, since Borglum’s words are reproduced in Griffith’s text: “...We believe a nation’s memorial should, like Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln and Roosevelt, have a serenity, a nobility, a power that reflects the gods who inspired them and the gods they have become” (Griffith 10).

The gods they have become, exalted and idolized at America’s Shrine of Democracy. It’s at this point that I have to ask myself what Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln and Roosevelt would have thought of all of this. Perhaps they would have been delighted; perhaps they would have been horrified. How would they have felt about blasting apart a mountain to accomodate their likenesses? Perhaps Roosevelt,

an ardent conservationist and our first truly “environmental president,” would have objected. Would the presidents have appreciated being likened unto gods? It’s impossible to say for certain, but if any of these men were Christians, I suspect they’d chafe beneath the weight of the comparison.

On Borglum’s choice of subjects, Griffith writes:

Borglum chose Washington for obvious reasons. As general, Washington had helped the country shed the shackles of tyranny and form a new government based on individual freedom...Borglum believed Jefferson’s contributions as president and his 1803 Louisiana Purchase, which more than doubled the size of the U.S., were most deserving of recognition (Griffith 9-10).

Lincoln, we understand, was “admired most for his keen ability to hold the nation together in the midst of a civil war” (Griffith 10) and because he “freed the slaves” (Hilburn 1). Griffith notes that Borglum chose Theodore Roosevelt because the sculptor “had been friends with ‘T.R.’ and knew that his construction of the Panama Canal had allowed America to exert its influence around the world” (Griffith 10).

Let’s look beneath the surface of these words--both Borglum’s and Griffith’s. Jefferson was a slaveholder; he may have more than doubled the size of the nation, but the territory was purchased with little knowledge of--or consideration for--the people who already occupied it. Lincoln may have “freed the slaves,” but he was one of a series of presidents who presided over the systematic seizure of land from its Native American inhabitants. Of Theodore Roosevelt, Griffith writes, “His

construction of the Panama Canal completed the dream of Columbus and allowed America to exert its naval influence around the globe” (Griffith 19). Read “naval influence” as “imperialism.” The word “dream” glosses over the brutal story of what followed Columbus’s landing on American shores.

Cultural critic Richard Slotkin observes that “though war is denigrated as an end of civilization, it is exalted as a means to peace....The basic thesis of this historical argument is essentially the same as that of Theodore Roosevelt’s advocacy of American imperialism in ‘Expansion and Peace’ (1899): that ‘peace’ can only be imposed on the ‘barbarian races’ of the world by the armed force of a superior race” (Slotkin 174). These are hardly the sentiments one would expect to find attributed to someone memorialized at a shrine of democracy.

Civilizations have a long tradition of beatifying and deifying their heroes. Read the medieval tale, *The Song of Roland*, and you’ll find that Charlemagne communes with God via the Archangel Gabriel. History, including the disastrous loss of a battle and the death of the knight, Roland, happens as God ordains; its course is providential. Similarly, in 1894, Thomas Moran’s painting, *The Mountain of the Holy Cross*, was warmly received by the American public. The painting depicts a natural phenomenon—a giant crucifix—that became visible when two bisecting fissures on the face of a mountain filled with snow. When this painting was displayed in a retrospective of Moran’s work at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

in 1997, the curator noted that the public interpreted the phenomenon of the cross as a sign of God’s blessing on America. Interpretation is a matter of choice, and I find this choice particularly striking. Why would America choose to interpret the cross as a sign of God’s blessing, a divine “thumbs up”? Were we, as a nation, so collectively self-righteous that we didn’t conceive of it as a warning, or even a gentle reminder? If some observers did, their voices were likely muffled by public enthusiasm.

Now let’s examine the word “shrine.” *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary* defines “shrine” as “a case, box or receptacle, especially one in which sacred relics (as the bones of a saint) are deposited; a place in which devotion is paid to a saint or deity” (Webster’s 1075).

What is held up for worship at this shrine is the ideal of democracy, personified in the visages of these four presidents. If we look at the icons and examine the language, as Stephen Greenblatt instructs, to study how our culture represents its art to itself, we’ll find that, in truth, Mount Rushmore is more a monument to American imperialism than a “shrine of democracy.” Cultural critic Donald Pease writes that, “when interpreted from within the ideal space of the myth/symbol school, American masterworks legitimized hegemonic understanding of American history....That metanarrative of American history, insofar as it involved a universal subject in a transhistorical action, should have been classified as political mythology rather than history” (Pease 24). Pease is referring to works of literature,

but his comments are easily applied to Mount Rushmore National Monument and its accompanying publications. The presidents are mythologized, and everything they “accomplished” in the name of imperialism is officially sanctioned. (Recall, again, Kundera’s *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. Let’s forget that “democracy” doesn’t mean “democracy for everyone.” Let’s forget that some of us are freer or more equal than others).

Writing of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show, Richard Slotkin muses that “[Cody] seems to have been sincere in his belief that the Wild West offered something like a poetic truth in its representation of the frontier....But the ‘moral truth’ of the frontier experience, which the Wild West emphasized, was its exemplification of the principle that violence and savage war were the necessary instruments of American progress” (Slotkin 171). Likewise, Mount Rushmore may offer a “poetic truth” in that it embodies the myths and dreams of a nation; the books and brochures, with their beautiful photographs and laudatory language, may prettify the moral truth, but they are unable to change it.

Sacred Ground/Stolen Land: The Sanctity of Stone

“I want, somewhere in America,” Borglum continues,

so far removed from succeeding, selfish, coveting civilizations, a few feet of stone that bears witness, carries the likenesses, the dates, a word or two of the great things we accomplished as a nation....Hence, let us place there, carved high, as *close to heaven* as we can, the words of our leaders, their faces, to show posterity what manner of men they were (Griffith 10. Italics mine).

It's unclear from Borglum's words whether he meant that the monument should be located far from “selfish, coveting civilizations,” and therefore in a remote place like the Black Hills, or whether he believed that the United States itself, buffered by two oceans, was far from such civilizations. In either case, we know that the monument is situated precisely in one such selfish, coveting civilization, in the heart of sacred lands that were stolen for their gold.

“The Sioux claim to the South Dakota land dates back to 1868,” notes writer Daniel Chu, “when the federal government ‘forever’ formally deeded to the the Great Sioux nation millions of acres, including some 7.5 million acres in the Black Hills. In 1877, following discovery of gold and the public outcry over the Indian defeat of George Custer, Congress broke the treaty and took back the land for white settlement. More than a century later, after many protests,” Chu continues, “the Sioux brought the dispute before the U.S. Supreme Court, which ruled in their favor in 1980.” According to Chu, Justice Harry Blackmun noted, “A more ripe and rank case of dishonesty may never be found in American history.” Chu adds that the Supreme Court awarded the Sioux nation a cash settlement, plus interest dating back to 1877. But the Sioux have refused to touch the money, and it now sits in a trust valued well in excess of \$200 million (Chu 68).

It's a painful juxtaposition; this mining of what the Sioux consider sacred land seems like a violation. “When man has lost the sense and the taste of true natural

riches...he rummages in the entrails of his mother...” writes Derrida, interpreting Rousseau (Attridge 87). Rousseau writes:

The Mineral Kingdom has nothing in itself either amiable or attractive; its riches, enclosed in the womb of the earth, seem to have been removed from the gaze of the man in order not to tempt his cupidity; they are there like a reserve to serve one day as a supplement to the true wealth which is more within his grasp, and for which he loses his taste according to the extent of his corruption. Then he is compelled to call in industry, to struggle, and to labor to alleviate his miseries; he searches the entrails of earth; he goes seeking to its center...for imaginary goods in place of the real good which the earth offers of herself if he knew how to enjoy it (Attridge 87-88).

Whether or not we consider a thing or place “sacred” depends upon our perspective. The Sioux definitions of “sacred” and “God” didn’t conform to those of the white majority, so they were simply irrelevant. I pose this hypothetical question: What if Skull Hill, the site of the crucifixion of Jesus, were in the Black Hills? Would we have mined them anyway? Think back to America’s interpretation of Thomas Moran’s *Mountain of the Holy Cross*, and the likely answer is yes. We probably would have taken it as a sign of God’s beneficence, a reinforcement of our Manifest Destiny. To the miners who invaded the Black Hills region in 1877, what was sacred about the land was, very likely, its stores of gold.

Crazy Horse Memorial

Seventeen miles southwest of Mount Rushmore, another face emerges from a mountainside. The Ziolkowski family continues the work initiated by sculptor Korczak Ziolkowski, who began carving a portrait of the late Sioux Warrior in 1949,

after Sioux Chief Standing Bear invited him to do so. When we examine the brochures and articles, we find that, like Rushmore’s Doane Robinson, Chief Standing Bear seems to disappear once the artist’s vision takes over the story. What Ziolkowski envisioned was a full head and torso sculpture of the slain warrior, mounted on his horse, about to charge into battle. He also envisioned a complex which would house the University and Medical Training Center for the North American Indian, as well as the Indian Museum of North America. The project is privately funded; the Ziolkowskis rejected a government offer of \$10 million because Ziolkowski did not believe the government would faithfully carry out his vision.

Crazy Horse Memorial remains controversial. For one thing, Crazy Horse was notoriously private. He refused to be photographed or to have his image reproduced, and it is questionable whether or not he would have approved of a project like this. For another, these days, blasting the face off a mountain for the sake of a sculpture seems gratuitously damaging to the environment.

When the Mount Rushmore monument was first proposed, the project had its detractors, but they have been nearly silenced by history. “The monument was conceived and carved in an era (1927-1941) when environmental sensitivity was largely dormant,” Donald Jackson writes in *Smithsonian*. “Cora Johnson, a feisty South Dakota editorial writer, was an exception,” he continues. “‘Man makes statues, but God made [the mountains],’ she wrote. ‘Let them alone’” (Jackson 65). And

when the National Park Service organized a 50th anniversary celebration to kick off a \$40 million fundraising drive to finance monument renovations and construction of the new Visitors Center, *Time* noted that “not everyone was in the mood to celebrate. Environmentalists decry the busts as a desecration of nature” (*Time* 25).

A Monumental Irony

When I recovered from my initial shock on first glimpsing the mountain, I turned my attention to my urgent need to eat breakfast, and strode into the Monument’s cafeteria. The dining hall was draped with red, white and blue banners; John Philip Sousa-esque, military music sounded with the relentlessness of Muzak over the heads of the travel-weary diners. Lincoln glanced up at me from my two \$5.00 bills as I paid for my over-priced breakfast, and Washington stared back as the cashier handed me my change. I’d made a poor choice in foregoing the Quaker Instant Oatmeal--always a safe bet--for the French toast, which I soon discovered was simply Wonderbread dipped in an instant egg mix. I bit into my breakfast. The maple syrup, I knew, had more to do with flavor chemical plants in New Jersey than with maple trees in Vermont. Likewise, the food manufacturers and grain concerns that had harvested and processed this breakfast on my plate had little to do with Thomas Jefferson’s vision of a nation of self-sufficient yeoman-farmers. I sliced a banana, thinking for a moment that the poet Carolyn Forché wrote that bananas in the supermarkets nearly made her scream after she witnessed the abuse of the

fieldworkers in Latin America. It's easy to forget this, so I did, and ate my breakfast without guilt. Through the window I watched two hawks circling in front of the big heads. The faces of the presidents were lined with fissures that looked like the scars of microsurgery. The brochures say this monument will last another 500 generations.

Mount Rushmore remains a monumental irony on the American landscape. It is a gross, yet strangely beautiful, example of the way we choose to represent our culture to ourselves. We want to believe in the ideals of democracy. And we like our heroes uncomplicated and untainted by truth; that's why we choose to mythologize them in this way. Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln and Roosevelt may, indeed, have been extraordinary men. That their likenesses have been memorialized in granite doesn't change the fact that, like the rest of us, they had feet of clay.

In order to be perceived in its true character, the landscape of the American West must be seen in terms of its sacred dimension. Sacred and sacrifice are related. Something is made sacred by means of sacrifice; that which is sacred is earned....Wounded Knee is sacred ground, for it was purchased with blood.

--N. Scott Momaday
from *The Man Made of Words*, p. 105

BLANKET OF SKY

For Nicky McDonough and Ivy Pin

It's mid-January and I'm three days into a cross-country drive after a holiday visit with my family in New Jersey. Awash in prairie violet shades of dawn, the sky blankets the land around me. The sheer expanse of the plains is startling, and my mind takes a moment to readjust after several weeks among the dense cities and tight mountains of my eastern origins. This is a terrain I saw for the first time less than a year ago, but it's the same landscape I instinctively drew in kindergarten--sky smacked clean against earth. From Kadoka, South Dakota, I angle south on Highway 73, stealing glimpses of the badlands to the west. I'm taking a circuitous route, looping off the interstate and heading home to Montana via Wounded Knee.

A friend recently asked why I feel compelled to visit old battle sites and western landmarks. I go for the stories. I figure if I'm going to live in the west, I'd better learn to understand its history; at Wounded Knee, I hope to pick up a glimmer of insight. The author N. Scott Momaday writes that ground becomes sacred when it's baptized with blood or endowed with stories. Where language and landscape

meet, Momaday says, the ground is holy. He also says that words are alive, and that stories, once they are told, exist like spirits, whether or not we are aware of them. I make pilgrimages for stories--to examine the landscapes that give rise to the language we use to define ourselves; to try to untangle the words that grow like grass over truth.

Stand on a rise at Little Bighorn on an autumn afternoon and you see miles of nothing but the undulating, golden topography of Crow country. A palpable serenity seems to rise out of the once blood-soaked ground. Chief Joseph Battlefield is more remote--up near Montana's hi-line, north of the Bears Paw Mountains and just south of the Milk River. There's a terrible eloquence about the landscape. I've read that Lewis and Clark named the Milk River thus because its tawny color reminded them of milk tea. Look back through the annals of American exploration and conquest, and you'll find a lot of prelapsarian language and imagery, as if the New World were Europe's second shot at Eden. But the truth is that what the Europeans were really looking for was Canaan--the biblical "Promised Land" of milk and honey. And if early settlers found themselves in Eden, by God, they were going to make it their version of Canaan--a land of milk and beef and grain and money. Climb a hill at Chief Joseph Battlefield and you are out of sight of the Milk River, but not the windblown funeral wreaths scattered among the grasses, or the herds of black cattle grazing in the neighboring honey-colored fields.

I visited Chief Joseph Battlefield on the kind of day when you know global warming is real: it was mid-November and 70 degrees. Dry winds combed the plains. Rough-legged hawks cut the sky, and a pair of them settled side by side on the road, facing south. I startled a pair of white-tailed deer out of the brush as I thumped toward a sign that tells the story of the final surrender of the Nez Perce, and reproduces Chief Joseph's famous "I will fight no more forever" speech. My heart and throat contracted as I worked over the words.

There's something in the stories of these former battlegrounds that resonates with sickening familiarity. When I read that the Sioux were prohibited from engaging in the Ghost Dance, I can't help recalling my mother's stories of her Irish ancestors, who secretly celebrated Mass in the mountains, out of range of British gun sights. When I read of Indians who were prohibited from wearing their traditional blankets for a potlatch, I'm reminded of the Scottish clans who were stripped of their tartans. I think, too, of my mother's stories of how my Irish grandfather and his fellow townsmen were systematically rounded up and physically abused by soldiers my mother referred to as "the Black and Tans." When I read of Indian children who were forbidden to speak their native language, I think of the Celtic tongues that were suppressed as the British imposed English on their conquered neighbors, and as British cartographers remapped and renamed the features of the subject landscapes. Words have power, Momaday says; language is sacred. English--*beautiful*

English--is the language I've inherited because of conquest. I'm not sure how I could survive if my native language were stolen from me.

And when I read that American newspapers carried effusive articles celebrating the cavalry's "victory" at Wounded Knee, I'm reminded of Adolph Hitler's announcement that Germany was returning Poland's fire on the first morning of World War II. I recall, too, the breathless euphoria that buoyed the United States during, and in the immediate wake of, the Gulf War. And I wonder what, if anything, we have learned in the last hundred-odd years.

I want to understand America, to know something of the people who were forced to make way for me. I want to learn the history I was never taught in school. And I want to pay my respects at Wounded Knee, where hundreds of Sioux--largely unarmed, many of them women and children--were slaughtered by the U.S. Cavalry on December 29, 1890, in a massacre that crushed the Indian resistance. These Sioux were considered outlaws because they'd left their reservation. But as a band, they were powerless. They'd already surrendered, and Big Foot, their chief, was so ill with pneumonia that he was brought into camp on a pony drag. Their camp was surrounded when a fight erupted; a shot exploded, a soldier fell, and the cavalry opened fire. Exactly how many died at Wounded Knee is uncertain, since some of the bodies were carried off by their kin, but some estimates are as high as 350. One hundred forty-four Sioux lie buried in a mass gravesite. Thirty U.S. troopers also died that day.

Wounded Knee is on South Dakota's Pine Ridge Reservation, south of Badlands National Park and east of Buffalo Gap National Grassland. Today, the Pine Ridge Reservation is one of the poorest communities in the United States; local unemployment hovers around 75%, whereas the national average is less than 5%. President Clinton visited Pine Ridge last July to announce the reservation's designation as an "empowerment zone." This means that the government intends to funnel some cash into a couple of public works projects, and a handful of private companies have pledged to assist the tribal colleges with technical skills training programs. Clinton also proposed the construction of a Lakota Sioux Heritage Cultural Center to attract the millions of tourists who visit the Badlands, Mount Rushmore and Crazy Horse Mountain each year.

A coyote shoots across the road in front of my car. "Coyote!" I shout in greeting. Coyote sightings are a novelty to me, although I've read that this hardy, ubiquitous canine thrives even in New York City, where I lived for five years before coming west. The coyote streaks into the grass, then pauses to look back at me. He's small and wears the same colors as the faded winter grasses--golden brown tipped with snow.

The coyote and the landscape help ease some of the ache I feel after saying good-bye to my family. "It's a terrible thing to be torn between two countries," my mother, who left her native Ireland as a young woman, used to tell me. I finally

understood what she meant when I spent a couple of years living overseas. Now it strikes me that, within the vastness of America, you can feel that same gut-lascerating rent without packing a passport.

I come from a big family. New Jersey, where I grew up and where most of my folks still live, is the most densely populated state in the union, and it lies within a metropolitan region that I can't comfortably inhabit. "There's no horizon here," I used to complain when I lived in Manhattan, and there isn't, unless you're atop the World Trade Center. Otherwise, you're packed into an asphalt ravine along with several million people, each one in a tremendous hurry--not to mention several million groaning buses and screeching automobiles wheezing exhaust into your breathing space. You have to look straight up if you want to see sky. I came west to live among mountains, to study literature, and to write. My new hometown is in a pocket in Montana's Missoula Valley, and I sometimes find myself standing transfixed in the most unlikely places, watching the interplay of mountains and sky: windblown clouds sketching charcoal streaks over the Rattlesnake Range north of the interstate; a yellow disk of moon sliding up from behind Mount Sentinel and illuminating the Wal-Mart parking lot.

I turn west on Route 18 and get out of my car at the junction for Wounded Knee. A roadside sign gives a brief history of Crazy Horse, the Oglala Sioux chief who refused to recognize treaties and who led the Sioux warriors in a number of

critical battles, including the one that killed Custer at Little Bighorn. According to the sign, Crazy Horse was murdered in 1877 when he entered a U.S. fort, unarmed, for a conference with a military officer. During his lifetime, he never permitted anyone to photograph him or to reproduce his likeness in any manner. One has to wonder how he would feel if he knew that his image--an icon, really, since no one knows what Crazy Horse looked like--is being blasted into Crazy Horse Mountain, 17 miles from Mount Rushmore.

Trash is scattered over the pavement around the sign--broken beer bottles, aluminum cans, a disposable diaper still taped closed and shaped in the form of the baby it had once swaddled. A honeycomb of holes perforates the sign. "Bullet holes, or some fluke in the steel?" I wonder, slipping my fingers into a few of them, as if I could read their history like some form of ballistic Braille. But I know nothing of guns, and I can't be certain. The sign is also scarred with black markings like small, dark clouds. Had someone pelted it with fistfuls of dirt? I reach up and touch the blackened areas and find that each blotch is a cluster of little pockmarks. "A BB gun, maybe," I figure, shivering in the cold air. I get back in the car. Wounded Knee is seven miles up the road.

The first thing you see when you reach Wounded Knee is a graveyard rising out of a hilltop right at the edge of the pavement. I figure this is the place, so I bounce up a corrugated dirt drive and get out of my car in front of a small church.

Sacred Heart Catholic Church is an unpainted, box-shaped structure with a cemetery directly in front and another a short distance out back. The church is simple, and it reminds me of one I'd visited with my mother in New Jersey just a few days earlier. St. Joseph's Shrine is five miles down the backroads from the house where I grew up. It's a place that I imagine Emily Dickinson--who said she liked to "keep Sabbath" outdoors--would have appreciated. Built on a hillside and facing north toward New Jersey's low mountains, the shrine is simple and focused on the landscape. The wall behind the altar is plate glass. Stand, and you see mountains and sky. Sit or kneel, and you face a windowful of sky. Having met God more easily elsewhere, I'm uncomfortable in most churches--but not that one. "You've never been here before, have you?" my mother had asked as we pulled into the parking lot. "How did you know I like to come here?" Actually, I'd been there many times, and I knew my mother liked to go there because she has always liked that place. But because she has Alzheimer's, she didn't recall that we'd gone there together, just a couple of days earlier. That day, we'd watched a flock of wild turkeys skirt the edge of the woods behind the shrine, then fade into the trees.

My mother settled herself near the altar, and I went outside and roamed the grounds until the cold forced me indoors. I sat in the back, to give my mother privacy in her prayers, and watched her from behind. She was framed in sky, and I stared at the back of her head--blonde, carefully coiffed and nodding as she prayed--and I tried

to imagine the plaque that was cobbling her brain like snowpack, and I tried to imagine a God who would have to look mercifully on someone like my mother--so small, so faithful on her knees, struggling to hold on by means of "reminder" notes spread out on her kitchen table. On this trip east, I'd learned that one of my sisters had recently entered our parents' house and found our mother in tears. When asked why she was crying, our mother had answered, "Because I can't remember anything."

My mother still knows that I'm her daughter, and she still remembers my name. "Are you taking some kind of a course?" she asked me several times over the holidays. I am. "But don't you already have a degree?" She's right; I have a couple of them, and I'm not surprised she's confused about that. "What is it you're studying?" English. "Oh," nodding. She has forgotten that, as a kid, I often slept with a book and a flashlight. She has forgotten the years of English classes, the stacks of books, the stories, poems, and notebooks. She is forgetting who I am.

I've read that in rural Montana it's customary to tie a rope from your house to your woodshed and on into your barn before the first snowfall. That way, you won't get lost and die in the yard when you leave your house during a blizzard to collect firewood or check on the animals; you can grope your way back to sanctuary. I sometimes wonder if that's how my mother feels--like she's fingering threads of reality while around her the snow comes down, muffling the familiar sounds and outlines of her landscape. And I sometimes imagine that I see her standing outside

while around her the air blows white and thick with relentless snowfall. I watch her disappear.

I don't try the doors of Sacred Heart Church; I open the gate in the chain-link fence and follow the dirt path that winds through the cemetery. "Don't walk on the graves, Terry," my mother's voice cautions, and I'm eleven years old and it's summer and my mother has taken me to the cemetery where my little cousin, Nicky, has lain just long enough for the grass to green-over the plot before his headstone. Nicky was four years old when his accidental drowning propelled him toward heaven like some sweet, sacred angelfish. My mother was his godmother. She places flowers on his grave. We kneel together in the grass, and my mother cups a hand over her nose and mouth, stifling her sobs.

I walk along Sacred Heart's dirt path. From the dates engraved on the headstones, I realize that I'm in the wrong place. This isn't the site of the Wounded Knee massacre; it's the graveyard of Wounded Knee's Catholic church. I'm not sure why, but I stay anyway, keeping to the path. The names on the graves are a kind of poetry; they haven't been so long anglicized--like mine, for instance, which means "Carrying Sheaves of Corn" in Hebrew--that they've lost their intrinsic lyricism. Some of the graves are marked with wooden crosses; a few are identified by a single stick tied with a ribbon of rag. Little ones lie here, and old ones, too. One of the mounds is fairly fresh. Offerings are piled on the graves--plastic flowers, tins of

Christmas cookies. A stuffed reindeer has tumbled off one of the mounds; its antlers poke into the chain link fence.

And suddenly I'm crying bitterly into my gloves. "These are not my dead," I keep reminding myself, as if that mattered. I'm losing my mother. I've left the people I most love on the other side of the continent, and I don't know when I'll see them again. There is a sadness for my lost cousin; out of the distance of thirty years it comes with the clarity of an adult's grief, rather than a child's bewildered, inarticulate sorrow. And if I weren't a white American who grew up tight-lipped and walking in lines in Catholic schools and who lived too many years in the northeast, I'd lift my face from my hands and scream at the bright Dakota sky.

This private pain is not what I had expected to feel at Wounded Knee. My tears surprise me, but they shouldn't. Wounded Knee is, after all, a burial ground of dead mothers and children. The Lakota shaman Nicolaus Black Elk recalls finding dozens upon dozens of bodies of women, children and infants who were shot at close range or killed by cannon fire. The cavalry had torn into them as they'd run or ducked into a gully for shelter. Black Elk found babies alive and alone in the grass. He saw an infant trying to suckle the breast of her mother's bloody body. The dead mothers lie stacked here together with their children and whoever was left among their husbands and fathers and brothers, buried in a pit in the sacred ground.

What I don't know as I'm salting the cemetery is that the following morning, back in New Jersey, my best friend's mother will die without warning, alone in her house with a bag of groceries in her arms. Her name was a poem: Ivy Pin. Think sprig of ivy. Think, too, of the literal translation of the name of the French-American man she married: the French *le pin* means, in English, *pine*. Ivy entwined around pine. Her name might easily have meant "Welcome." Her husband used to sigh that she took in "strays"--assorted neighbors, or friends of her kids who would sleep on the Pins' couch when, for whatever reasons, they couldn't go home to their own parents. They might stay for weeks at a time. She listened to me and spoke to me in ways my own mother often didn't--without judgment, and as an equal. And just by watching Ivy, I learned things my mother didn't teach me: that tears are OK; that it's OK to put your arms around someone; and that we have to approach life with a generous, forgiving spirit and a sense of humor. In her later years she assumed the shape of a bear, and her house grew crowded with grandkids and foster grandkids and litter after litter of kittens. I was privileged to know Ivy for 22 years.

Just before the massacre at Wounded Knee, Black Elk had a vision of heaven; he recalls that when he found the dead, he knew where they had gone, and he desperately wanted to join them there. Scott Momaday remarks, in his memoir *The Names*, that his father, Al, always spoke of the author's grandfather in the present tense, even though the old man had died before Momaday was born. The

grandfather's death seems merely a circumstance in the timelessness of his existence. It would be comforting to believe that the people we've lost still walk beside us, as they did in earlier times. I don't know anything about that. But I know for certain that Momaday's right about the stories--they're still alive here at Wounded Knee. The love is still alive here, too. You can feel it, and it hurts.

I quit the first cemetery and cross a sloping field to the one behind the church, still thinking maybe, just maybe, I'm in the right place. A fire has scorched the ground here sometime recently; my footsteps break the charred crust, releasing the scent of cinders. Two blackened automobile carcasses rest near the base of the incline. I reach the second cemetery, but it's not the site of the massacre; it's simply another graveyard. I climb back across the ashfield to my car.

From the hilltop, I spot another official-looking sign on the road below. I drive downhill, and the sign--peppered with holes, like the Crazy Horse one--relates the story of the Wounded Knee Massacre. Behind it, an unmarked dirt road forks off in three directions. I take the right fork. It's deeply rutted and my car--a ground creeper--scrapes uneasily over the surface. I round a curve and find that this branch leads back out to the main road. I'd have to drive over a trough to get to it, though, and The Creeper would never make it. I turn around, taking care not to pitch myself into the deep trenches on either side of the path. I washboard along the furrowed left fork, but this way ends at another church. And it's at this point that I cave. I don't

take the middle fork. I'm not prepared for any surprises the road may offer. I could get out and walk. But I'm utterly spent and have no stomach left for any more death. I forfeit--for this time, anyway--any chance of finding that particular glimmer of historical insight for which I'd hoped. "I'll come back," I promise the air as I roll onto the paved road. *Turn around*, I keep thinking as I drive away. But I don't.

At the town of Pine Ridge, I stop at a Texaco station and fill up the gas tank. Pine Ridge may be hurting, but at this place the cash registers purr and snap with deliberate energy. A woman hurries by me; she is dressed in a winter coat and hat decorated in the colorful pattern of a Native American blanket, and I feel suddenly self-conscious and shabby in my driving clothes. I pass a man whose worn, wolf-like face is so startlingly magnetic that I have to force myself to look away when he catches me staring at him.

I wash my face in the restroom sink. Then I stock up on junk food and caffeine and walk back outside. I stretch, fold my body into the car and drive north and west beneath a blanket of sky. I have to make tracks; I aim to reach Devils Tower before sundown. Devils Tower rises from eastern Wyoming's Black Hills--territory that is sacred to the Sioux and dozens of other Native American tribes. The landscape is infused with their stories. For Momaday and his Kiowa kinfolk, Devils Tower is a place of transformation and redemption. Their story of the tower's origins is one of deliverance--a skirting of death. It explains the familial connections between

humankind, animals, earth and sky. I've been to Devils Tower before. On my last trip, I left prayer bundles for myself and a friend, wrapped in strips of cloth torn from my red bandana and tied to a juniper hugging the tower's base. I knew I was leaving our prayers at the foot of the throne of God.

AMEN

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