UCLA
American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title
Three Plays: The Indolent Boys, Children of the Sun, and the Moon in Two Windows. By N. Scott Momaday

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/42j4p879

Journal
American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 32(2)

ISSN
0161-6463

Author
Comprone, Raphael

Publication Date
2008-03-01

DOI
10.17953

Copyright Information
This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, availalbe at https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

This strikes me as a particularly useful way to reverb racial identity. Native Americans, quite simply, can only flourish when we acknowledge that we are "differently Indianed." Speaking his Native language works for Oren Lyons. Playing saxophone, singing, and writing poetry in English work for Joy Harjo. Both contribute to the survivance and thrivance of their individual nations, and it's about damn time we accepted the tribal and experiential differences from which our strengths spring.

Genocide of the Mind, edited by MariJo Moore (2003), volume I of this set, worked to document both forced assimilation and indigenous resistance, revealing one of the biggest dangers: that in our effort to resist, we force ourselves into rigid categories that literally cut off and dismember parts of ourselves. *Sovereign Bones* takes the next step: asserting the right to both a collective Native community and identity *and* to individual, tribal identities—and beyond that, the right to be Native artists and writers who choose their own representations of self. Sovereign, right down to the bone.

Deborah A. Miranda
Washington and Lee University

Three Plays: The Indolent Boys, Children of the Sun, and the Moon in Two Windows. By N. Scott Momaday. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007. 177 pages. $24.95 cloth.

The Pulitzer Prize–winning Kiowa author of *House Made of Dawn*, N. Scott Momaday has created another series of literary masterpieces to add to his opus: the two plays "The Indolent Boys" and "Children of the Sun" and the screenplay *The Moon in Two Windows.* In previous works, such as *House Made of Dawn, The Man Made of Words, In the Bear's House, The Ancient Child,* and *The Names,* poetic language becomes a vehicle for cultural expression and storytelling. Similarly, in *Three Plays,* the expression of identity through storytelling and drama is Momaday's cardinal preoccupation.

In "The Indolent Boys," Momaday describes a tragedy that occurred in 1891 when three young boys ran away from the Kiowa Indian Boarding School at Anadarko, Oklahoma after the eldest boy had been whipped for fighting. The three boys froze to death during a terrible storm as they sought to return to their families. The Kiowas, enraged and grief-stricken, desired to obtain revenge and threatened war while the administrator responsible for administering punishment to the boys, the pugnacious Mr. Wherrit, hid in the rafters of the school and escaped. As Momaday indicates in his eloquent description of the play, this event is marked in the pictographic calendars of the Kiowas. "The Indolent Boys" relates to *The Moon in Two Windows* because both play and screenplay deal with genocidal boarding school policies often associated with Richard Henry Pratt, a haughty Eurocentrist who felt that the only way Native Americans could survive in a white world was to "kill the Indian and save the man."

In "The Indolent Boys," Barton Wherrit is a callous, self-centered man whose cowardice is revealed at the end of the play. In his report documenting

the boys' flight, he blames the youth who run away for their indolence rather than taking responsibility for his excessively draconian methods of punishment. Like Pratt, Wherrit imagines reservations as wastelands that must be civilized. Momaday's decision to entitle the play "The Indolent Boys" is ironic because the play is a dismantling of the *mission civilisatrice* of the Eurocentric world; rather than being portrayed as indolent savages, Momaday portrays the three boys as heroes who courageously defy the goal of boarding school administrators and educators to eradicate American Indian cultures.

In the screenplay *The Moon in Two Windows*, Pratt possesses the same genocidal attitudes toward Native Americans as Wherrit. Pratt travels to a Native American reservation to convince Chief Spotted Tail to give up reservation children by sending them to boarding schools. Pratt is deceptive and uses flattery to convince Spotted Tail that there is no other choice but to send reservation children to the boarding school: "If your children were educated in the ways of the white man, they would be better able to avoid the mistakes of their elders" (117). After Chief Spotted Tail sends children to the boarding school, en route, Gray Calf, known as Grass, perishes, most likely from influenza. In an act of cowardice, Pratt has Etahdleuh, his Native American servant, drop off Gray Calf's body from the train without a proper burial. This event is an omen signifying the future destructive character of the boarding school. Miraculously, Gray Calf reappears later in the story; Luther, a Native American retelling the story, interprets her resurrection as a sign of ancient traditions continuing on despite Pratt's genocidal policies. This event indicates that Pratt's efforts to civilize the American Indian only result in pushing Native American cultural practices underground as the students at Carlisle Boarding School develop a pan–Native American vision of their diverse cultures in opposition to the dominant Euro-American worldview. Ironically, marching bands and football become ways of reconnecting with Native American ancestors because these Euro-American cultural activities closely resemble the importance of music and athletic games in Native American cultures.

In "The Indolent Boys" and the screenplay *The Moon in Two Windows,* Momaday preserves a hitherto unwritten cultural history for future generations of twenty-first-century Americans. He meticulously describes in both "The Indolent Boys" and in *The Moon in Two Windows* how ethnocentric boarding school administrators and educators attempted to strip Native American children of their cultural identity by divesting them of their Native American names. Instead of describing Native Americans as the humiliated victims of a genocidal culture, Momaday shows their remarkable knack for survival, adaptation, and improvisation. Wherever there was an effort to annihilate Native cultures, Momaday shows that fierce, heroic resistance occurred within Native American communities.

In "The Indolent Boys" and in *The Moon in Two Windows,* Momaday provides his audience with a wide range of characters in order to display the diversity of views during the boarding school period. In "The Indolent Boys," John Pai, a Native American destined to become a missionary, appears to be the ideal product of boarding school education: his status as a Christian and his zealous effort to become a preacher represents in Wherrit's imagination

the total assimilation of the Native American into Euro-American culture. Despite his ability to assimilate to Pratt's vision of the civilized American Indian, John Pai openly retains pride in his culture and suggests that his ability to adopt the position of a preacher has much more to do with the importance of the oral tradition in Native American culture. Similarly, in *The Moon in Two Windows,* Luther is able to adapt to both the Anglo-Saxon culture that Pratt represents while retaining his Native American cultural roots. Other examples of characters able to adapt to both Native American cultures and Euro-American traditions abound, such as the legendary prowess of Jim Thorpe, the Native American athlete who was a product of the boarding school at Carlisle. In *The Moon in Two Windows,* Thorpe becomes a symbol of pan–Native American pride as his team demolishes the Army team at Carlisle in a football game.

Just as in "The Indolent Boys" and *The Moon in Two Windows,* Momaday emphasizes the persistence of Native American culture in "Children of the Sun." While realism and revision of history are important aspects of "The Indolent Boys" and *The Moon in Two Windows,* "Children of the Sun" deals with Kiowa legends of the creation of the world. Tragedy and heroism are important themes in "The Indolent Boys" and *The Moon in Two Windows,* whereas "Children of the Sun" is a play written for children that emphasizes wonder, delight, beauty, and fantasy. The story of twin heroes, the sons of an earthly mother and a Sun god, or the Talji-dai, is described in dramatic terms. Grandmother Spider is an interesting character that is old and clownish. The vision of a redbird and the arrival of color to an otherwise bleak world is an important event, which occurs when Aila discovers a pool that swirls and sparkles with every imaginable color. The story of Aila and the Sun marrying appears to follow the pattern of the Adam and Eve story in Genesis. The *pomme blanche,* the white apple, represents the fall of humankind, while the Sun forewarning Aila not to eat the apple plays a role similar to God in Genesis. The killing of a snake is similar to the story of Cain and Abel because the snake that the twins kill is actually a reincarnation of their grandfather. When one of the twins eats fresh meat that appears outside of a tepee, he is transformed into a beast and disappears, which illustrates the theme of karmic cause and effect. Because of his reckless behavior and his willingness to eat meat without knowing its source, the second twin is punished. The story of the first twin killing a stranger outside of a tepee with an arrow, a tale mentioned in a previous collection of Momaday's stories, is told here to illustrate the importance of language. The medicine bundles of the first twin represent the significance of the sacred in Kiowa culture. The twins are archetypal heroes who represent the ideals of bravery, courage, generosity, and goodness. "Children of the Sun" is a play filled with humor, wonder, and myth that is both instructive and entertaining for younger audiences. Momaday is able to capture with the ear of a poet the cadences of the Kiowa oral tradition.

In *Three Plays,* Momaday creates a poetic vision of Native American history through the unique vision of a gifted storyteller. Each of these works opens up a window into the past: in "The Indolent Boys" and the screenplay *The Moon in Two Windows,* Momaday captures the heroism in Native American

communities during the boarding school period, while in "Children of the Sun," he describes the mythic universe of the Kiowa. Momaday's writing is entertaining, instructive, and thoughtful; he avoids platitudes about the boarding school period and shows the resilience of the Native American spirit. Lastly, he underscores how Native Americans exemplified the values of bravery, courage, generosity, and goodness during harsh times.

Raphael Comprone
Saint Paul's College

Trail of the Red Butterfly. By Karl H. Schlesier. Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2007. 288 pages. $27.95 cloth.

Karl H. Schlesier is a former professor of anthropology and the author of several books and articles on Plains Indians. This scholarly expertise proves the strength and perhaps the weakness of his second novel. The book starts out slow—what a twenty-first-century reader would consider slow—but before long the reader is pulled into its nineteenth-century rhythms. The story, which concerns our hero Stone's quest for his twin brother, documents the journey of a group of Cheyenne, Kiowa, and Gataka into Spanish Mexico in the early 1800s. (Schlesier based the journey on an 1805 map by Juan Pedro Walker, which is included in the book.) The reader is there as the group raids ranchos for sheep and horses; battles banditos and Spanish soldiers; negotiates for food and information; and kidnaps Spanish-speaking residents who can lead them toward their quarry—a traveling circus in which Stone's brother Whirlwind is rumored to be performing.

The story has counterparts in two narrative tropes common to European literary history and its mythology: the physical journey toward personal enlightenment and the search for the doppelgänger, or spirit other. Yet the journey/quest tale has much precedent in Native literature (oral and written) as well. Schlesier not only presents Stone's group's voyage as a mission to recover Whirlwind but also as a travel adventure, an exploration of a foreign country and customs. To some extent Stone's group is in the same position as the reader, as we discover early-nineteenth-century Mexico.

The red butterfly of the title is the monarch, which the prologue tells us is a Cheyenne "holy bird." Stone and his group follow the monarch's trail from the Great Plains to central Mexico, although they are not literally following the butterflies. Although the preface notes that "no single individual [monarch] makes the entire round-trip journey," Stone's group does return. On the one hand, this makes problematic the monarch's use as motif; on the other hand, it heightens suspense: will they return? (ix).

This is a tale of Plains Indian culture, and Schlesier knows a great deal about it. The reader is introduced to Cheyenne social customs, war rituals, and what one might call "everyday life," though this journey is momentous and strange even for the Cheyenne. Schlesier chronicles the trials, both emotional and practical, of a long, dangerous journey in the early 1800s in painstaking