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Radical Democracy in N. Scott Momaday's *The Names: A Memoir*

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This article explores the radical democratic discourse in Native American writings, using N. Scott Momaday's memoir *The Names: A Memoir* as an anchor text. Drawing on Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's radical democratic vision, I interpret how American democracy constitutes politics itself as a perpetually open project with the contribution from Native people's everyday life practice and non-elite cultural (re)production: the progressive inclusion of different voices (bloodlines) undermines the fullness of the commonality through which their inclusion was solicited in the first place. The democratic process involves constant movement between confrontation and coalition, between the common and the particular, between public and private, and between the collective and the individual. It rejects elitism and takes dialogues, participation, and communication seriously

Specifically, Momaday begins his memoir with a list of generic names, which entails political openness and democratic potential: "animals," "birds," "objects," "forms," and "sounds." He ends the same paragraph with the names of his distant Kiowa relatives whereas the survival of the

Kiowas was a product of the tribe's interaction and association with their colonists, Euro-Americans, and with the Crows, who gave them Tai-me, the sacred Sun Dance doll, from that moment the object and symbol of their worship, and so both being shared in the divinity of the sun. The Kiowas acquire their culture and religion from the Crows and survive natural and human catastrophe because of the inputs from the outside world. The enfolding of the inside and the outside blurs / blends the diverse bloodlines as Momaday progresses in his life narrative. In the very next paragraph, he continues to recite names, this time, the Euro-American names in his mother's linkage. This generations-old coalition of names leads to his act of naming and re-creation. The Kiowa names move alongside the Euro-American ones before they finally mingle in his parents. By beginning and ending his memoir with names, Momaday consciously recreates a Kiowa identity, which has long been threatened, ravaged, and almost destroyed by the dominant elite-White culture but continues to sustain itself by weaving together diverse bloodlines, by rejecting the constraint of rationality and categorization, and by blurring the boundary between the inside and the outside, the self and the other. With such openness, Native American authors such as Momaday have revealed the importance of affinities and non-elite cultural production within the democratic discourse and a promising version of the equivalence that Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe emphasize so strongly. In addition, Momaday points to the alternative relations with the foreign (the alien) and to nature, which would keep elitism at bay and affect the shape of a radical democratic politics itself. This paper attempts to show the specific trajectory of Native American identity as a politics toward a radical democratic vision and the more general movement of

radical democracy toward a horizon informed by the specific struggles of Native Americans.

By definition, the concept of “radical democracy,” as Ernesto Laclau and others propose, refers to a diversity of perspectives and points of view that parallel, intersect, and contradict each other, without the desire for totality or mastery.¹⁾ Its critical project targets such discourses as nationalism that construct a holistic and naturalized fiction, as to suppress “the inherent contingency and historicity of its identity.”²⁾ It seeks to build a transformative political subject by articulating “different constituencies into a [contestable] whole,” as Tønder and Thomassen point out.³⁾ The necessary condition of democracy, then, would be what Lummis calls “political virtue”: “the commitment to, knowledge of, and ability to stand for the whole.”⁴⁾ “Radical democracy” is in this sense hailed as the answer to the dead ends of the contemporary identity politics. The acting subject becomes the juncture of multiple “subject positions,” weaving together an open system of differences to involve the self with the other, the inside with the outside, the native with the foreign. We are confronted with the emergence of “a plurality of subjects, whose forms of constitution and diversity it is only possible to think if we relinquish the category of ‘subject’ as a unified and unifying essence.”⁵⁾

1) Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London: Verso, 1990); C. Douglas Lummis, *Radical Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2nd ed (New York: Verso, 2001).

2) Lars Tønder and Lasse Thomassen, eds. *Radical Democracy: Politics Between Abundance and Lack* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 6.

3) *Ibid.*, 6.

4) *Ibid.*, 37.

Lummis' starting point is what he calls a "rectification of names." As he puts it, "Democracy was once a word of the people, a critical word, a revolutionary word. It has been stolen by those who would rule over the people, to add legitimacy to their rule. It is time to take it back."⁶⁾ Our central problem is to identify the discursive conditions for the emergence of a collective action, directed toward struggling against inequalities and challenging relations of subordination. We might also say that our task is to identify the conditions in which a relation of subordination becomes a relation of oppression and domination.⁷⁾ "The externality of the subordinator and subordinated identities to each other, rather than their absorption into the system through their positions," lies at the base of the relation of oppression and domination.⁸⁾ To effect or rather radicalize democracy is to rectify the alienation, separation, and mutual exclusion or externalization of the subordinator and the subordinated.

In this regard, the concept and practice of radical democracy also rejects elitism. Elitism is the belief or attitude that those individuals who are considered members of the elite—a select group of people with outstanding personal abilities, intellect, wealth, specialized training or experience, or other distinctive attributes—hold the power to influence the social policy-making and their views on a matter are to be taken the most seriously or carry the most weight and are most likely to be considered constructive to society as a whole. Their extraordinary skills render them especially fit to govern, subordinate, and dominate; power becomes concentrated in the hands of the elite. Radical democracy

5) Laclau and Mouffe, 153.

6) Lummis, 15.

7) Laclau and Mouffe, 153.

8) *Ibid.*, 156.

is a critique of centralized power of every sort—elitism as well as charismatic, bureaucratic, class, military, corporate, party, union, technocratic, etc. It is, by definition, the antithesis to all such power.⁹⁾

As far as elitism is concerned, radical democratic practice does not wait for the revolutionary event but begins with the micropolitics of everyday life and non-elite cultural production by “occupying the terrain upon which one stands, where one lives, works, acts and thinks.”¹⁰⁾ While the practice of everyday life and non-elite cultural production entails heterogeneity as excess beyond defining and defined categories and disciplines, Laclau’s notion of heterogeneity—that which “escapes attempts to divide the political space into an inside and an outside”—calls for radical democracy to also recognize and respond to “nonhuman” agents, which would require the work of representation as “naming” to weave “such cells of resistance together into a … shared political subjectivity.”¹¹⁾

Specifically, as Bruno Latour insightful pinpoints, democratic action, consists in the “activity of forming a working whole or ‘cosmos’” that operates without a sense of that whole. Thus, Jane Bennett takes from Bruno Latour the idea of a “*demos* … guided by a self-organising power” that “comes to a decision through a process akin to that of brewing or fermentation.”¹²⁾ Such an idea is incomprehensible if one imagines a political field composed exclusively of human agents who are legitimately

9) Lummis, 25.

10) David Trend, ed., *Radical Democracy: Identity, Citizenship and the State* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 227.

11) Jane Bennett, “In Parliament with Things” in Tønder and Thomassen, 133–48.

12) *Ibid.*, 143.

bound by world alone. Bennett counters this modernist imaginary with a materialist one in which “humans are figured as themselves materialities inextricably enmeshed with nonhuman entities and forces.”¹³⁾ Bennett closes with a call for radical democracy to both recognize that humans act only “in league with a wide and changing variety of natural entities” and generate “new ways to listen to them and respond more carefully to their outbreaks, objections, testimonies and propositions.”¹⁴⁾

Latour’s work is filled with what look like efforts at naming this whole in which “humans” are inextricably intertwined with “things” (his terms “collective” and “cosmopolitics,” for example). This is not too much unlike Michel de Certeau’s view of the indigenous communities as “egalitarian.” In his article “Politics of Silence,” de Certeau concludes his “heterologies” project with the reciprocal relations among the individual, society, and the earth in American Indian communities and cultures to constitute an order that no single figure can detach from the whole—a piece of wisdom our contemporary cultural critics have to learn from the indigenous groups.¹⁵⁾ De Certeau uses the term “egalitarian”¹⁶⁾ to describe the tribal communities precisely because all beings are considered equal in their coherent and supportive cultural system, one that nurtures and protects and is enriched by each individual life and creativity. This egalitarian imaginary acknowledges a perspective of commonality, which human beings, animals, and objects share. It is then an anti-anthropocentric vision that enables us to

13) *Ibid.*, 137.

14) *Ibid.*, 145.

15) Michel de Certeau, “Politics of Silence: The Long March of the Indians.” *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 230.

16) *Ibid.*, 230.

mediate among the others and act across them.

Momaday's memoir commences with "rectification of names," naming the whole in which "humans" are inextricably intertwined with "things." He starts his paragraph with names and representation of the cosmos order, implicating how human is generated from natural entities and thus acts in league of animals and things:

The names at first are those of animals and of birds, of objects that have one definition in the eye, another in the hand, of forms and features on the rim of the world, or of sounds that carry on the bright wind and in the void. They are old and original in the mind, like the beat of rain on the river, and intrinsic in the native tongue, failing even as those who bear them turn once in the memory, go on, and are gone forever: Pohd-lohk, Keahdinekeah, Aho.¹⁷⁾

Momaday begins his memoir with a list of generic names, which transcend the human terrain to approach cosmological genesis. The list of names of "animals," "birds," "objects," "sound," "forms," "features," "wind," "rain," and "river," etc. crosses the borders of the self and other, human and nonhuman, culture and nature to entail political openness and democratic potential. Human is intertwined with natural entities and the intersection becomes intrinsic in the indigenous "naming" as "representation," that is, in the "native tongue." Language and the sacred are indivisible. The earth and all its appearances and expressions exist in names and stories and prayers and spells, as Momaday relates in his "Address to the United Nation." All this, however, is made possible by the bearing of "the memory." He then ends the same paragraph with his remembrance of the names of his

17) N. Scott Momaday, *The Names* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1976), 3.

distant Kiowa relatives: Pohd-lohk, a tribal elder who gives him the name Tsoai-talee, "Rock-Tree Boy," Keahdinekeah, his great grandmother, and Aho, his grandmother.

Other names follow in the very next paragraph, the Euro-American names in his mother's linkage. The Kiowa names move alongside the Euro-American ones before they finally mingle in his parents: "And Galyen, Scott, McMillan, whose wayfaring lay in the shallow traces from Virginia and Louisiana, who knew of blooded horses and tobacco and corn whiskey, who preserved in their songs the dim dialects of the Old World."¹⁸⁾

This generations-old coalition of names leads to his act of naming and re-creation. The intertwining of names nominates the themes and threads of Momaday's life narrative: his identity or rather identification resides in the convergence of diverse bloodlines, as later he would make transparently clear.

Strikingly, at this early moment in his narrative, Momaday implicitly retrieves a remote link with Cherokee ancestry through his recounting of her mother's early childhood in 1929. His mother Natachee, or "Little Moon," was three or four years old as she played in the woods where, three generations before, her great-grandmother's people had passed on the Trail of Tears.¹⁹⁾ In 1929, as Momaday puts it, "she was about to embark upon an extraordinary life." For, born of an European father and a Russian (Asian) mother, she never thought of herself as an Indian until "that dim native heritage became a fascination and a cause for her, inasmuch, perhaps, as it enabled her to assume an attitude of

18) *Ibid.*, 3.

19) N. Scott Momaday, *The Names: A Memoir* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1976), 22.

defiance, an attitude which she assumed with particular style and satisfaction, it became her."²⁰) Through her Cherokee linkage, Natachee imagines who she is by changing her costumes, drawing a blanket about her and placing a feather in her hair. This act of imagination, representation, and identification is among the most important events of his mother's early life, as later the same essential act is to be among the most important of his own. She then went off to Haskell Institute, the Indian school at Lawrence, Kansas. Her roommate there was a Kiowa girl, Lela Ware. "Destinies began to converge then, in 1929."²¹) That was the convergence, a new generation emerged as the old passed away; and the disparate external bloodlines intertwine in the inside; the exclusion becomes inclusion with the inside and outside merging into the mixed blood of the Kiowa. That was the year in which the old woman Kau-au-ointy died on the north side of Rainy Mountain Creek and was buried at Rainy Mountain Cemetery, Kiowa County, Oklahoma. Kau-au-ointy had been a captive and a slave. The Kiowas, who stole people as well as horses in their heyday, took her from her homeland of Mexico when she was a child. As it happened with so many of the captives, Kau-au-ointy outlived her slave status, married, and brought new blood to the tribe in her children. The captives, slaves, represent a "strain," a push, a force, an excess and extension, which is peculiarly the vigor of the Plains Indian cultures from the time of contact. The old slave woman passes down new blood, transforming a lack into an abundance, through her marginal (re)production. She was Momaday's great-great-grandmother and Momaday was born one hundred years apart.

20) *Ibid.*, 25.

21) *Ibid.*, 25.

Here, my argument pivots on Momaday's signature trope, "memory in the blood," or "blood memory," to dissect how indigenous identities have been formulated through critical encounters of disparate bloodlines and cultural legacies, in effect, through the blurring of boundaries between the indigenous and the alien. While the maintenance of racial (blood) purity remains central to the colonial agenda, the indigenous blood as well as that of other marginalized races and classes is stigmatized as the abject, which threatens the stability and fixity of the bloodlines. Western racial economy privileges Euramerican pure blood. And yet, as Robert Young insightfully observes, colonial desire, "constituted by a dialectic of attraction and repulsion," brings with it the threat of the fecund fertility of the colonial desiring machine.²²⁾ A culture in its colonial operation becomes hybridized and alienated from its European "original." In the face of the deterioration of bloodlines, the consequence of de-civilization, the U.S. federal policies have paradoxically subjected Native Americans to an inclusive standard of "blood quantum" or "degree of Indian blood." Native American identity is fractionalized and estranged through a governmental measuring of blood. A standard of racial identification, blood quantum was in actuality invented to serve as a device for documenting and fractionalizing "Indian" status for the federal government's purpose of alienating Native individuals from their collectively held lands. Seemingly enshrining racial purity as the ideal for authentic American Indian identity, blood quantum in reality discloses the fact that more than 98 percent of contemporary Native Americans are genetic hybrids. Consequently, mixed-blood Native Americans are considered genetically estranged from

22) Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995), 175.

their full-blood indigenous ancestors once a certain “degree” of mixing with races other than the indigenous has been passed.

This is, in effect, to estrange the indigenous into the alien, to make them strangers in their homelands. Native American activist M. Annette Jaimes has traced the federal government implementation of blood quantum to the passage of the General Allotment Act in 1887.²³⁾ According to Jaimes, Native Americans were required to prove one-half or more Indian blood in order to receive allotments of their tribal estate and the trick was that “surplus” lands were then made available to white settlers. As Jaimes documents, the already shrunken Native American land base was “legally” reduced by another staggering ninety million acres—the standard of blood quantum was developed into a taxonomy of variable Indian identity that came to control their access to their tribal lands and all federal services, including commodity rations, annuity payments, and health care.²⁴⁾ Native American identity became subject to a genetic burden of proof whereas the criteria were always the inventions of the white government. Thereby blood quantum represents a fundamental attack on the tribal sovereignty of Native American nations. Not only were tribal lands transformed into white settlers’ homes and Natives into perpetual exiles in their homelands, but Native Americans became a vanishing race as the racial (blood) codes excluded the genetically marginalized from both identification as Native American citizens and consequent entitlements.²⁵⁾

23) For Jaimes’ work, see Chadwick Allen, “Blood (and) Memory.” *American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism and Bibliography* 71.1 (1999): 96–97.

24) Quoted in Allen, 96–97.

25) Quoted in *Ibid.*, 97.

If blood quantum stands as a “metonym for the ‘problem’” of defining Native American personal and communal identities,²⁶⁾ Momaday then twists it into his “blood memory,” a genetic tie that is carried by his blood and is thus immortal (as even a small degree will do). Momaday imagines his tribal elders in order to project himself into their life spans and beyond—through blood.

It is interesting to see how the official standard of Indian blood quantum is tested and teased out in Momaday’s birth documents. In a passage where Momaday conflates his birth with his tribal ancestors’ imprisonment through a common geographical locale at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, Momaday strategically inserts a notarized document, issued by the U.S. Department of the Interior, Office of Indian Affairs, Anadarko [Oklahoma] Area Office, to certify his birth, and yet does so only to denounce its validity by naming it and dropping it once and for all:

To whom it may concern:

This is to certify that the records of this office show that Novarro Scott Mammedaty was born February 27, 1934 at Lawton, Oklahoma, and is of 7/8 degree, as shown on the Kiowa Indian Census roll opposite Number 2035....

By Act of June 2, 1925 (42 Stat. 253), all Indians born within the territorial limits of the United States were declared to be citizens of the United States.²⁷⁾

Whoever has been following the opening genealogical diagram or Momaday’s narrative in his memoir will be able to figure that Momaday’s blood quantum is at best 9/16 or less than 4/16, instead of 7/8. The

26) *Ibid.*, 98.

27) Momaday, *The Names*, 42.

insertion of this birth certificate apparently challenges the notion of blood quantum as a defining factor of Native American identity. The birth document demystifies the fractionalizing figures and reveals the absurdity of the federal authority to grant tribal membership/citizenship. It is nominated and yet dropped immediately as Momaday contrasts and displaces the governmental imposition by drawing on a tribal locale, Tsoai in Kiowa, meaning "rock tree," after which his name, Tsoai-talee, "Rock-Tree Boy," is given by his Kiowa elder Pohd-lohk.

Consequently, by substituting a name, which embodies a distinctive tribal line for one, based on fractionalization of blood (body parts), Momaday recognizes as the first notable event in his life the journey from Oklahoma (his birthplace) to the Black Hills (tribal/ancestral home-base): "When I was six months old my parents took me to Devil's Tower, Wyoming, which is called in Kiowa Tsoai, "rock tree." Here are stories within stories; I want to imagine a day in the life of a man, Pohd-lohk, who gave me a name."²⁸⁾

The name intimately connects the newborn to a landscape significant in the tribal memory. It invokes the stories of his ancestry associated with that landscape. It is not his blood quantum, inscribed by the white government, which confers his identity. Rather, it is his blood memory that functions to reach a self-definition. Momaday counts on the story of his being situated in the tribal lineage for his identification. In so doing, he simultaneously identifies his tribe as a people rooted in the American landscape rather than as one that is imprisoned in the Indian Territory or in the official standard of blood quantum.

And yet, it is the dilemma of the parallel worlds Momaday inhabits,

28) *Ibid.*, 42.

the parallel bloodlines at once indigenous and alien which informs much of his personal history as it is in effect merely a mirror of the larger history of the Americas. Alien blood results in alien memory.

Petar Ramadanovic's work *Forgetting Futures* reignites the debate about the crisis of memory and the search to understand the relationship between the past and present, remembering and forgetting, placing trauma, identity, and race under an intellectual microscope. The book as a trauma study was significantly initiated by a close reading of Momaday's passage in *The Names*, quoted in length:

... And now I am afraid, nearly terrified, and yet I have no will to resist; I remain attentive, strangely curious in proportion as I am afraid. The huge, shapeless mass is displacing all of the air, all of the space in the room. It swells against me. It is soft and supple and resilient, like a great bag of water. At last I am desperate, desperately afraid of being suffocated, lost in some dimple or fold of this vague, enormous thing. I try to cry out, but I have no voice.²⁹⁾

Appropriating Momaday's passage, Ramadanovic aims to disclose the characteristic of "memorial processes" (1). Momaday faces a past growing out of all proportion, beyond definition, which threatens to obscure his vision. The past expands and becomes vague and enormous to the point that "there ceases to be one object his memory can apprehend and bring back."³⁰⁾ As he tries to remember, he paradoxically forgets. Ramadanovic contends that forgetting, "a spilling over the boundaries of thinghood, beyond presence," is intrinsic to memory and is what makes remembrance possible: the dislocation of the past in reminiscence

29) Momaday, *The Names*, 63; quoted in Petar Ramadanovic, *Forgetting Futures: On Memory, Trauma, and Identity* (New York: Lexington Books, 2001), 1.

30) Ramadanovic, 1.

should then be regarded as a process, fundamental for the work of memory. The remembrance of the past cannot perform the roles of integration (of identity) and gathering (of facts) without at the same time forcing a “dispersion, effacement, and a forgetting of what has happened.”³¹⁾

We cannot disagree with Ramadanovic's brilliant elaboration on the dialectic between remembrance and forgetting, for forgetting as we understand is neither the opposite of remembering, nor an omission. And yet, Ramadanovic fails to recognize what is in “a name,” because right following the passage of his opaque vision, Momaday prescribes the secret medicine of “[r]estor[ing] [his] voice for [himself]”:³²⁾

How many times has this memory been nearly recovered, the definition almost realized! Again and again I have come to that awful edge, that one word, perhaps, that I cannot bring from my mouth. I sometimes think that it is surely a name, the name of someone or something, that if only I could utter it, the terrific mass would sap away into focus, and I should see and recognize what it is at once; I should have it then, once and for all, in my possession.³³⁾

Momaday's memory fails, for remembrance can be retarded by a crisis of communal and individual identity, by the loss of the unspeakable and unspoken past which is perpetually alienated. *The Names* asks how Native Americans can recover from this monumental psychic rupture. Ramadanovic fails to dissect what is in a “name.” We should then go back to the name of “Tsoai,” the name of both “someone” and “something.” Momaday is named after the tribal home-base, a

31) *Ibid.*, 2–3.

32) Momaday, *The Names*, 63.

33) *Ibid.*, 63.

name given by his tribal elder. Both personal and communal history is carried on by a name. The recurrence of the name sustains tribal survival. Momaday's opaque consciousness spotlights the danger to tribal identity of losing the memory of their location of origin as they lost their land. The "name" then maintains the dynamics of remembrance and commemoration. The name of "Tsoai," displacing Momaday's official birth certificate, is emblematic of his recovery of indigenous ancestry, of the tribal efforts to establish a home, a community, a land, as the grounding of the Native self, the source of the Native origin. To remember is not to discover the past outright but, rather, to heal the wounded, fragmented, and alienated present. Momaday's official birth certificate does not sustain anything in his "possession," but a name does—the name of both the Native self and Native land, and ultimately, that of the Native spirit.

Native Americans have a long memory. As Michel de Certeau puts it, they do not forget their land under occupation by "foreigners." In their villages, they preserve a painful recognition of five centuries of colonization.³⁴⁾ Constantly, they go back to their ancestral home-base and, in so doing, they "keep alive the memory of what the Europeans have forgotten," as de Certeau states, preserving a memory that has left hardly a trace in the occupiers' historiographical literature.³⁵⁾ While this memory constitutes Native American resistance, it is yet punctuated by cruel repression and is marked on the "tortured body": "the body is memory," as de Certeau argues.³⁶⁾ Momaday contrasts and displaces the governmental imposition by drawing on a tribal locale,

34) De Certeau, 226.

35) *Ibid.*, 227.

36) *Ibid.*, 227.

Tsoai, after which his name, Tsoai-talee, "Rock-Tree Boy," is given. Substituting a name, which embodies both a distinctive bloodline and a tribal land, for one that is based on fractionalization of blood (body parts), Momaday intimately connects his blood with his ancestral blood, his body with a landscape and the natural entities that inhabit the landscape. What can Momaday count on for remembering a trip taken back to his ancestors' Black Hills at the age of six months? It is his inherited blood memory that functions to help reach a self-definition. It invokes the stories of his ancestry associated with the landscape that is significant and sacred in the tribal memory. It is not his blood quantum, inscribed by the white government, which confers his identity.

Momaday's name is a name of his tribal sacred place. To encounter the sacred is to be alive at the deepest center of human existence. Sacred places are the truest definitions of the earth; they stand for the earth immediately and forever; they are its flags and its shields. At Devil's Tower, that is, Tsoai, as Momaday puts it, "you touch the pulse of the living planet; you feel its breath upon you. You become one with a spirit that pervades geologic time, that indeed confounds time and space."³⁷

Momaday recognizes as the first notable event in his life the journey from Oklahoma (his birthplace) to Devil's Tower, Wyoming:

Tsoai, Devil's Tower, is more than just an individual name; it is the name of the Kiowa sacred place and their story, a story which both recognizes that humans act only "in league with a wide and

37) N. Scott Momaday, "Address to the United Nations at the 'Cry of the Earth' Gathering in November 1993, the Gathering of Indigenous Peoples of the Americas at the United Nations."

changing variety of natural entities” and generates “new ways to listen to them and respond more carefully to their outbreaks, objections, testimonies and propositions”: as his grandmother relates, “eight children were there at play, seven sisters and their brother.” Suddenly the boy became a bear and ran after the sisters. Terrified, the sisters came to the stump of a great tree and the tree spoke to them: it bade them climb upon it. As they did so, the tree began to rise into the sky. The tree grew and the seven sisters were borne into the sky, and they became the stars of the Big Dipper. “From that moment,” Momaday depicts in another of his life narratives *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, “and so long as the legend lives, the Kiowas have kinsman in the night sky”³⁸): “Whatever they were in the mountains, they could be no more. However tenuous their well-being, however much they had suffer and would suffer again, they had found a way out of the wilderness.”³⁹)

There are things in nature that engender an awful quiet in the heart of man; Devil’s Tower is one of them. Two centuries ago, because the Kiowas could not do otherwise, they made a legend at the base of the rock. The rock became animated by the tale and grew and owned a life of its own while late it was re-animated into an identify living and lived. If there is anything that radically distinguishes the imagination of democracy, it is the primacy of the geographical element. We sees an exact and direct relationship between oral narrative forms such as myths, ceremonies, and stories and a tribally specific sacred relationship with the land or landscape—with the

38) N. Scott Momaday, *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, 1969. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005), 8.

39) *Ibid.*, 8.

landscape encompassing the animate matrix between the human and other natural entities and including land and sky and all plants and beings within.

For Native cultures, place becomes the primary referent for all formulations of meaning and value within the culture. To fail to understand this primacy of place and what happens or has happened at specific places is to fundamentally misunderstand Native traditions. Vine Deloria writes, "American Indians hold their lands—places—as having the highest possible meaning, and all their statements are made with this reference point in mind."⁴⁰) We see the landscape as being filled with markers of the past, of endurance through time, of continuity and change, and of struggles around race and ethnicity.

Momaday's name does not merely embody and remember a place and an individual body but also an earth body. It resides in the blood as memory. As Momaday puts it, in his *House Made of Dawn* and *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, "[t]hough [my grandmother] lived out her long life in the shadow of Rainy Mountain, the immense landscape of the continental interior—all of its seasons and its sounds—lay like memory in her blood."⁴¹) He refers explicitly to his grandmother's "memory in the blood." Part of his project in *The Way to Rainy Mountain* is for him to recount the physical pilgrimage he made across his ancestral landscape and to couple this homing journey with the extant knowledge of his tribe to develop in his own memory what had fully been operative in his grandmother's lifetime and had developed in her "memory in the blood."⁴²) Momaday imagines his

40) Vine Deloria, Jr., *God Is Red: A Native View of Religion*, (Golden, Colorado: North American Press, 1994), 62.

41) *House*, 129; *Way*, 7.

42) Allen, 102.

grandmother in order to project himself back through actual physical contact with the land his grandmother inhabited, and through her blood. The very blood identification is what makes Native Americans indigenous to the land. He conjures an indigenous ancestor to the land, describes his encounters with the conjured ancestor, draws his identification with her as occurring through “blood,” and, in so doing, envisions the emergence of the Native self.

Momaday’s Native blood does not come from the paternal lineage alone. Whereas his maternal family abounds with white predecessors— I. J. Galyen, Nancy, George Scott, Theodore and Anne Ellis, a thinly threaded blood connection to a Cherokee great-grandmother finally becomes the blood which defines his mother’s Native identity, and the consequence is the 7/8 degree Indian blood as mistakenly shown in Momaday’s birth certificate. This is, indeed, a super model of how the alien turns into the indigenous, which is the life story of his mother Natachee Scott, who names herself Natachee, meaning “Little Moon,” identical with the name of her Cherokee ancestor. As an alien on both sides (the white and the red), Natachee reinvented herself as indigenous. Her “exotic” physical appearance aided her in “passing” as an “Indian.” Though at every turn she was reminded that she was an “interloper” and that “she could expect to have no place among them,” she eventually managed to participate in the Navajo and Jemez communities where she lived.⁴³⁾ She brought new blood to the Kiowa just as one hundred years before, a slave woman, whom people stole from her homeland of Mexico, brought new blood to the tribe in her children. She is Momaday’s great-great-grandmother, named Kau-au-oainty.

43) Momaday, *The Names*, 39.

The Kiowa culture is one of mixing, the amalgamation of the alien and the indigenous. Or, rather, the dividing line between the two no longer holds. The Kwuda, “the coming out people,” the name they could “know that they were and who they were” – “They could at last say to themselves, ‘We are, and our name is Kwuda.’”⁴⁴) But even a name is not constant, and the Kwudas’ identity evolves as new blood joins. Momaday often makes it clear that the Kiowas’ sense of self is an array of pieces. The patterns have been pivoting on an outsider now on the inside. It starts with fear of the newcomers to their group but eventually the outsider becomes an accepted member of the tribe. Identity comes from community, not blood quantum levels. With close cultural contact, customs, beliefs, and traditions can be shared, learned, transmitted, and applied. Momaday recounts his “blood memory,” a Kiowa history of mixing and redefining themselves.

Momaday traces genealogy and emphasizes continuity, in particular with his Kiowa relatives. Ironically, however, it is his experience of discontinuity, the experience of the alien that becomes the shaping force of his memoir. His mother was one-eighth Cherokee and seven-eighths Euramerican blends, and young Momaday spent his childhood in several different Southwestern communities (Gallup, Shiprock, Tuba City, Chinle, San Carlos, Hobbes), where he was in close contact with Navajo and San Carlos Apache, as well as Hispanic and Anglo children. Momaday portrays himself at once an insider and outsider and his memory is spurred by the sum of these diverse bloodlines. The once disparate bloodlines conjoin to empower the indigenous line, filling the missing link / the lack with the abundance. Kenneth Lincoln insightfully comments that “[t]ribal life centers on a common blood, a shared and

44) Momaday, *The Names*, 1.

inherited body of tradition, a communal place, a mutual past and present.”⁴⁵⁾ The Native memory as transmitted and sustained in the blood is then about “survival, *sur vivre*, to live on”⁴⁶⁾ with a blood and a memory that crosses over. This lays out a trans-racial model of radical democracy away from American elitism.

45) Kenneth Lincoln, *Native American Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 93.

46) Homi Bhabha, “Staging the Politics of Difference: Homi Bhabha’s Critical Literacy: Interview with Gary A. Olson and Lynn Worsham,” *Race, Rhetoric and the Postcolonial*, Ed. Gary A. Olson and Lynn Worsham (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), 37.

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Abstract

Radical Democracy in N. Scott Momaday's *The Names: A Memoir*

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This article explores the radical democratic discourse in Native American writings, using N. Scott Momaday's memoir *The Names: A Memoir* as an anchor text. Drawing on Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's radical democratic vision, I interpret how American democracy constitutes politics itself as a perpetually open project with the contribution from Native people's everyday life practice and non-elite cultural (re)production: the progressive inclusion of different voices (bloodlines) undermines the fullness of the commonality through which their inclusion was solicited in the first place. The democratic process involves constant movement between confrontation and coalition, between the common and the particular, between public and private, and between the collective and the individual. It rejects elitism and takes dialogues, participation, and communication seriously

Specifically, Momaday begins his memoir with a list of generic names, which entails political openness and democratic potential: "animals," "birds," "objects," "forms," and "sounds." He ends the same paragraph with the names of his distant Kiowa relatives whereas the name "Kiowa" was a product of the tribe's interaction and association with an external group of Crows, who named Momaday's ancestors "coming-out-people," i.e., "Kiowa." The enfolding of the inside and the outside blurs / blends the diverse bloodlines as Momaday progresses in his life narrative. In the very next paragraph, he continues to recite names, this time, the Euro-American names in his mother's linkage. This generations-old coalition of names leads to his act of naming and re-creation. The Kiowa names move

alongside the Euro-American names before they finally mingle in his parents. By beginning and ending his memoir with names, Momaday consciously recreates a Kiowa identity, which has long been threatened, ravaged, and almost destroyed by the dominant elite-White culture but continues to sustain itself by weaving together diverse bloodlines, by rejecting the constraint of rationality and categorization, and by blurring the boundary between the inside and the outside, the self and the other. With such openness, Native American authors have long revealed the importance of affinities and non-elite cultural production within the democratic discourse and a promising version of the equivalence that Laclau and Mouffe emphasize so strongly.

Key Words

Radical Democracy, Native American Writing, Non-elite Cultural Reproduction, Elitism, N. Scott Momaday