

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 6 (1992)

Artikel: Native Americans translating culture : Momaday and Anaya
Autor: Taylor, Paul Beekman
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-99892>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 17.04.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Native Americans Translating Culture: Momaday and Anaya

Paul Beekman Taylor

A Word has power in and of itself. It comes from nothing into sound and meaning; it gives origin to all things. By means of words can a man deal with the world on equal terms.

N. Scott Momaday¹

You can be separated for a hundred years, for two hundred, for four hundred, for a thousand years, from what is essentially your mythology, but the separation is a veneer. The myth will always emerge. It has to surge out and be known, because you carry it with you."

Rudolfo A. Anaya²

Múthos, which means both "word" and "story," is the matrix of cultural lore for both the Kiowa N. Scott Momaday and the Chicano Rudolfo A. Anaya, and perhaps no other writers of their backgrounds — North American Indian and Mexican-American, respectively — have done as much to bring indigenous American myth to the literary mainstream in English. Both have translated the mythic repertoire of their cultures from a traditional oral context into the literary economy of the United States. Their works comprise a paradigm of the Native American's transferring his arts into a foreign idiom without surrendering his particular idea of cultural identity.³

That translation consists of a recollection of the traditional myth of the land in which the writer personally participates. The myth itself, whether it

¹ *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (henceforth abbreviated as *WRM*), Chapter VIII, p. 33.

² Cited by Johnson and Apodaca 1990:428—29.

is Momaday's tale of Kiowa emergence into the world from a hollow log, or Anaya's story of *raza* emergence from the underworld through the *sipapu* under the guidance of the Spider Woman Cóatlícue, is chthonic. Its symbolic dimension, the landscape to which the Native American is inexorably bound, and the oral performance by which he participates in it distinguish his myth from the cosmogony of the European settler who has appropriated his land and disdained his "primitive" and "pagan" oral arts.

What the works of Momaday and Anaya exemplify as a whole, on the one hand, is the generic force of myth which shapes the communal identity of their tribe, or *raza*; and, on the other hand, the implications of literacy for cultural traditions whose expression is essentially oral. The mythic core of their work is a cyclical history of an initial emergence, a present state of migratory wanderings and a quest for a future return to pristine harmony of being. Although the quest is for a communal spiritual fulfillment, it is very much an individual task, a personal search for a lost health of mind and body, what the Navajo would call *hózhó* "well-being" or "blessedness." Story locates that search on a terrain whose inhabitants — all forms which fill the landscape — are telling witnesses if not participants in events. Sun, hill and stone are "grandfathers," and "Old Ones" in man's society because of their venerable status as permanent residents of the terrain (Schubnell 1985:95; Walker 1983:8).

The myth and its tradition of oral performance are distinct from the European backgrounds of the North American literary culture. First of all, whatever myths of the land he might have once had, the European immigrant had given up centuries earlier to politico-religious interests. For the old myths of land, vestiges of which are still observable in extant Anglo-Saxon, Scandinavian and Finno-Ugric records, Christianity substituted a doctrine of grace and salvation in which land is a negative and downward attraction of the body which contends with the upward spiritual attraction of the soul. Though politicizing the land of the Old World had emptied it of its mythic reservoir, many of the settlers looked upon a New World as an

³ Though he has, for the most part, lost familiarity with the Nahuatl of his Meso-American ancestors, the Spanish or English speaking *Chicano* — a name used earlier in Mexico for natives — is a significant member of the indigenous population of North America which migrated first southward to what is now Mexico, and then back north of the Rio Grande four hundred years ago.

occasion for a fresh "covenant" between land and spirit; but, the hope that literature could reinvest the wilderness with a noble pagan cultural past has faded into a disheartening realization of the incompatibility of Anglo-cultural imperialism with the land's traditional myths of benefit. Lose your land and you lose its myth no matter how hard you try to transport it to a new territorial home.⁴

Indigenous myth is also incompatible with the European's religious doctrine of sin and grace, his belief in a Creator-Deity proprietor of souls and his need for a universal symbolic mediation. The Indo-Hispanic who migrated north of the Rio Grande into Nueva Mexico was nominally Catholic, but the iconography of his fervent piety consists of concrete and local chthonic images. The Pueblo Indian's religious activities became "laminated," with a thin veneer of Catholicism over an uninterrupted faith in ritual ceremony. Since Native American religions celebrate an intensely personal rapport with the land, "evil" is the specific and particular ill which disturbs one's own and his community's harmonious collaboration with all things on the land. Distinct from Christian concepts of hierarchies in Creation, the Native American shares equally the same space with spirit, buffalo, snake, cactus and stone. If the Anglo counts land and its occupiers as property and tools of progress, the Native American reads the land's textual signs for the harmony man lost after his emergence, and which he must work to recover in his migratory wanderings toward return.

So the *mythos* of Native American tale-telling delights in images in the landscape, for each is infused with story-life. Someone who carries an amulet or pouch of earth about his neck is carrying with his person a text which celebrates the force of his bond to the land.⁵ For the old *curendera* of

⁴ This point is made eloquently by Charles Johnson in his novel *Middle Passage* (1990) which tells the story of a freed slave, Rutherford Calhoun — a caricature of the American on the move — who witnesses the forced transport of the Allmuseri tribe in 1830 across the Atlantic. The captain of the slaver, a polymath of unusual proportions, besides slaves carries their god in a crate below decks, as if he could barter both the flesh of the Black and his myth of being. When the ship sinks, no god is seen swimming toward either Atlantic shore. By this parable, Johnson puts into question the Black's subscription to and investment in the American melting-pot. The lost god is the Black's lost cultural identity.

⁵ The chthonian sense of the landscape is ubiquitous among Native Americans. The

Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*, to know the lore of the land — its shapes, seasons and herbs — is to know its history, for the imagination at work upon the land is the maker and transmitter of myth and belief. The point bears repeating, for the words which transmit what the eye sees are different in each teller. The myths are plastic, not fixed, but ever adapting to new contexts, unlike the "fixed" word of the Anglo's Scripture. This is true of every art-form: dance, pottery, petroglyph, sand-painting, weaving and ornamental design are all texts of seasonal ceremonies. Everything tells a story (Trimble 1987:23; Witherspoon 1972:179–203), and the spoken voice has power over things.⁶ In his essay "The Man Made of Words," (1970) Momaday recalls the Kiowa arrowmaker who holds the arrow shaft in his teeth as he straightens it. The tooth marks on the arrow are signs of words which are carried with its flight straight into the bosom of his enemy. The ultimate reality of experience, this parable insists, is not so much physical as linguistic, and both Momaday and Anaya emphasize the importance of the *sounds* of the written text, for the myth quickens only when sounded. Anaya tells a moving story of a young girl who grows up on the *llano* without hearing human speech. Alone she invents a language of communication with the yucca and wild grass, makes words for the seasons and imitates the sounds of birds; but, only when her father finally sounds her name can she cultivate the land (1982:22–31). Words are medicines. To forget the old songs is a sickness whose cure is to sing them back to life, even if the instrument of transmission is not yet fully mastered. The son of

Nez Perce Toohoolhoolzote, explained to his Anglo interrogators that "the earth is part of my body. I belong to the land out of which I came. The earth is my mother." (Utley 1984:7) In his negotiations with Benjamin Harrison, the Shawnee chief Tecumseh refused to sit in a chair by declaring, "The earth is my mother and on her bosom I will repose." (Gill 1987:6) For the Chicano Clemente in Anaya's *Heart of Aztlan*, the earth is the dark web of his sleeping mother (1976:18).

⁶ Even after the Cherokee chief Sequoyia made a syllabary in order to translate Anglo materials, his people expressed distrust of these "talking leaves." (Lincoln 1982:89) Most North American tribes have had access to writing and to reading their own language in Roman script from the end of the nineteenth century, but have used it primarily for necessary intercourse with the Anglo rather than for artistic ends.

Old Man Hat counts his wealth in the number of songs he knows, for a song has power over the well-being of material possessions (Dyk 1938:75–80). The importance of the song is not in its story alone, but in the life that story shares with both singer and song. All song makes myth.

Further, myth is the means by which mouth telling and ear listening meet across centuries. A character in Momaday's *The Ancient Child*, who has ignored the small part of Indian in him, visits Oklahoma to see and speak with ancestors he had never known of or cared for before. He is touched strangely by the sounds and sights: "He had a strange feeling there," the narrator remarks, "as if some ancestral intelligence had been awakened in him for the first time." (64) The Blackfoot James Welch says of his hero in *The Death of Jim Loney*, "I tried to make him find his past so he could find his future." "To be a leader," Anaya's Clemente in *Heart of Aztlan* comes to realize, "one must know the traditions of his father." (102) Traditionally, one learns from hearing.

The writing which now supplements and, in some cases, replaces oral performance, however, has wide-ranging influence that earlier oral performance in local dialects had not.⁷ For one thing, it allows the Native American to transmit his own image of self to the English-reading audience, where in the past, accounts and reproduction of his texts have

⁷ Elaine A. Jahner (Walker 1983:49) points out that writing changed both the phonology and semantics of Lakota within a single generation. Stock (1990:1–15), outlines kinds of changes literacy is apt to effect. He distinguishes a "hard" theory that reading and writing change mental habits from a "weak" theory that writing merely adds to an already existing way of making texts. It is obvious that the linguistic consequences of European "occupation" of the New World were different in the Hispanic and Franco-English zones of influence. Since the Spanish Jesuit insisted upon the religious obligation of reading for the convertite, and felt a need to know the native language in order to convert the heathen, bilingualism was common in both groups. As early as 1551 universities had been founded in Lima and Mexico, and the local languages were officially supported until the end of the sixteenth century when "Spanish" and "Mexican" factions of the population split into urban and rural linguistic and geographical factions which still exist (Eberenz 1989:102–8). Further north, with the notable exception of Mormon missionaries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, few Anglos took the trouble to live among the Indians in order to learn their languages.

been mainly the scientific enterprise of the anthropologist who lacked adequate understanding of native "symbols of meaning." (Isernhagen 1987:229) While he remained more written about than writing, the Native American had neither a reading public nor the means to develop one. Since the 1960s, the Native American has gained access to the book economy, writing more often in his "second" language. Consistent with the orality of his cultural tradition, his writing has the effect of speaking in print.

Though it lacks the individual flexibility of performance, writing preserves and authenticates a mythic perspective on the land which softens the effects of Anglo technological encroachment upon it. Writers like Momaday and Anaya preserve the spiritual resources of their peoples by writing of them in the language of their detractor (Walker 1983:3-4). As Soyinka has said of African writing in English (1990:114), translation is a strategy of "emergent" literatures in "recovering what has been hidden, lost, repressed, denigrated, or indeed simply denied . . . by the conquerors . . . and their Eurocentric bias of thought." Native American translation is, effectively, a transgression into the territory of the oppressor.

Finally, translating native myth into English invests English with something of the natural force of its matrix form. Momaday, a "native" English speaker, but sure of the linguistic heritage of his blood and imagination, explains that the sounds of Kiowa, Navajo and Towa lie firmly beneath his English expression (*The Names* 1976:60). As one critic observes, he renders an ancient language through his particular English, transforming it into a "language enriched beyond spiritual bounds." (Standiford 1982:194)⁸ The shift of language, then, need not block participation in the myths being transmitted. Crispin, the old singer of the Albuquerque *barrio* in Anaya's *Heart of Aztlan*, explains that the change of instrument does not damage the old essential lore, for the music of the old flutes of the poets and priests can be heard in the modern guitar, so long as

⁸ Early reviews of Native American writing display a patronizing linguistic bias. William James Smith's review of Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, for example, deplores the style that gets in the way of content, not able to appreciate that Momaday's particular style is adapted to particular Native Indian experience and, most importantly, a particular way of making meaning of experience (Standiford 1982:187).

the guitar is made with the same resinous stock of myth (27).⁹

No one has done more to translate these features of American indigenous oral arts into English Literature than Momaday and Anaya, and their mature work, such as Momaday's "prose-poem" *The Way to Rainy Mountain* and Rudolfo A. Anaya's novel *Tortuga* exemplify the conjoining of indigenous with Anglo "literary" cultures. As different in form and content as they are, both works are shaped by the interlacing of myth, landscape and oral participation which marks Native American art, whether of a Kiowa raised among Navajo and Towa or of a Chicano raised on the *llano* and in an urban *barrio*. From such childhood backgrounds, both claim their craft.

In the Prologue to *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, Momaday says of his book that it is "the history of an idea, man's idea of himself, and it has old and essential being in language." The "idea" is of the material loss of a culture whose beginning in the tribal memory of Momaday is the conjunction of the theft in 1832 of the *Tai-me*, the sacred Sun Dance fetish, and the great meteor shower of 1833 (*WRM* 85). Its end is marked by the last Kiowa Sun Dance ceremony above Rainy Mountain Creek in 1887, long after the buffalo it evokes had vanished from the economy. Momaday's story traces the material and spiritual defeat of the Kiowa whose culture is figured in the interplay of buffalo, mountain, creek, the sacred bundle *Tai-me*, and the traditional song and story which informs their connection. The front porch of his grandmother's house in Kiowa county, Oklahoma, from which he looks out over the rolling plains terrain, is the symbolic belvedere of his imagination: "To look upon that landscape early in the morning with the sun at your back," he muses, "is to lose the sense of proportion. Your imagination comes to life, and this, you think, is where Creation was begun." (*WRM* 5)

His tale joins time, event and recollection. It is told in twenty-four three-part illustrated chapters, grouped into three sections: "The Setting Out," "The Going On," and "The Closing In," titles which reflect the triad of emergence, migration and return, except that the last title refers to the tightening siege of the Kiowa by the Anglo. The first chapter opens with

⁹ Houston Baker remarks that the "use of English for audience literary reproduction is not as important as what the writer has made of the English language as a literary agency." (cited by Gates 1990:17).

the myth of Kiowa emergence from a hollow log, is followed by an etymological *excursis* into the name *Kiowa* (from *kwuda* "coming out") coupled with a description of the forms and gestures which mark Kiowa identity, and concluded with a personal recollection of a boyhood view of the plains in springtime. So go all of the chapters in the section: a traditional myth followed by a heard account of the past, and rounded off with a personal recollection.¹⁰

The first section of eleven chapters is a quest for the *Tai-me*, the sacred Sun Dance doll which is the pre-eminent Kiowa totem of tribal abundance. The last chapter tells of the Kiowa who turned into a water beast after eating magical buffalo despite his brother's warning, followed by a description of the song and food of the peyote ritual, and closed with an anecdote about Momaday's grandfather, a peyote man, who once felt the presence of a great water-beast. Thus the myth of emergence in "The Coming Out" includes, as Genesis myths always do, a mysterious complication which is tied to subsequent dispossession and displacement. The Sun Dance ceremony in the background of the story is an enduring sign of the way of return.¹¹ The *Tai-me* is the totem of Kiowa culture, and the nucleate sign of its story.

The triads in the seven chapters of the second section, "The Going On," link myths of tribal prosperity in hunt and war with historical accounts of the Kiowa and childhood impressions of the images on the landscape of southwestern Oklahoma. The myths are of the wealth of language, the life and the spiritual resources the Kiowa once enjoyed; the hunt and war stories move from the portentous burning of a heraldic tipi in 1872 to the prosperity of the horse-back buffalo hunt; and the youthful impressions are of the cultural typologies of the Kiowa in their late days. The last and most lasting impression is of the expanse of space stretching out from his

¹⁰ Jahner, in her Introduction to Walker's *Myths* (1983), points out that the oral stories of the Sioux, neighbors of the Kiowa on the plains, had two topics: the mythic past when the world was in process of creation, and recent and amazing events. With the individual telling which reflects a personal religious perspective (7), this collection mirrors Momaday's triadic narrative taxonomy.

¹¹ As Walker recalls persistently (1983:5--6), the Sun Dance encodes the core of the Plains Indian's belief. It dramatizes man's search, moving outward from his place of emergence, for his proper place in the universe (47).

grandmother's arbor, by now a symbol of the unobstructed atavistic view of self:

The arbor was open on all sides to the light and the air and the sounds of the land. You could see far and wide even at night, by the light of the moon; there was nothing to stand in your way. (61)

The five chapters of the third and last division, "The Closing In," portray the Kiowa under duress and siege by the Anglo. The opening divisions of the chapters are no longer old myths but recent events become story by the alchemy of the author's imagination. The second parts trace the material loss of the Kiowa after their military surrender at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, when buffalo, then horse and finally the Sun Dance was lost to him. The hidden and closely guarded *Tai-me* bundle and items of ceremonial dress are all that remain to attest to his former prosperity. The final passages recall the speaker's childhood contacts with these vestiges. The last chapter of the book, like the last hour of a day of mixed fortunes, is occasion to recall images which betoken the former fecundity of a culture whose prosperity of material and spirit is inextricably bound to the landscape and its seasons. It tells the story of a woman buried in ceremonial dress in an unmarked grave somewhere near Momaday's grandmother's house. Her hidden body is a metonym of the Kiowa's lost culture, traceable now only in the landscape of the imagination: "Mammedaty used to know where she is buried," Momaday recalls of his grandfather, "but now no one knows. If you stand on the front porch of the house and look eastward towards Carnegie, you know that the woman is buried somewhere within the range of your vision." (82) The pronoun *you* pulls the reader into the imaginative designing of a myth that resides, like the buckskin dress decorated with elk's teeth and beadwork, hidden from the physical eye, but visible *somewhere* within the ken of the atavistic eye of imagination: "Once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth," the chapter concludes, ". . . he ought to imagine that he touches it with his hands at every season and listens to the sounds that are made upon it." (83) Those sounds of the landscape are myths to translate across boundaries of cultural space and time.

A brief Epilogue emphasizes this power of the imagination to retrieve something of the spiritual and material loss of one's culture which, Momaday reflects, "is within reach of memory still, though tenuously now,

and moreover it is even defined in a remarkably rich and living verbal tradition which demands to be preserved for its own sake." (86) That tradition is figured by the hundred-year old woman, Ko-sahn, one of the few persons alive at the time of Momaday's childhood who could remember the Sun Dance. She tells the boy that when she was a child an equally old woman sang the beginning of the Sun Dance ritual while pouring sacred sand on the earth upon which the dancers would perform. Ko-sahn brings that song to Momaday, who sings it for us. It begins:

"We have bought the earth.
Now it is time to play;
As Old as I am, I still have the feeling of play." (88)

The feeling of play resides in the will to quest for the locus of emergence on the landscape of individual myth-making. The book's concluding poem, celebrating the Kiowa dead in Rainy Mountain cemetery, binds the message:

. . . The mind to be inheres
Forever in the nominal unknown. (89)

Like Momaday's journey toward an idea of self symbolized by the Sun Dance doll, Anaya's *Tortuga* is a quest for the "path of the sun," the bond of love holding all created things in harmony. The novel is a story of the painful and laborious recovery of a boy from paralysis caused by a broken back, accompanied by a spiritual recovery from the social and moral disorder of his past experience. Just as Momaday's Kiowa emergence entails a mysterious malediction, the cause of the injury which sends the boy away from home for treatment remains mysterious.

The setting of the story is a hospital for crippled children on a hill over the Rio Grande in south-west New Mexico. On the other side of the river is Tortuga, the sacred mountain of ancient migrating tribes which still inspires awe in those who believe in its salubrious underground springs. Most of the other children in the hospital are hopelessly crippled from accident, disease or birth defect. They include little children in iron lungs wasting away in what is known as "the vegetable garden," but everyone, resident nurses and attendants included, appears to be a perpetual inmate. There is desperate conviction among all that no one ever "gets out," and

Tortuga's dwelling there seems at first to be an aimless migration through the labyrinthine hospital wards.

From early winter until spring, the boy strengthens his will to survive and return. His spirit is fortified by the oldest resident of the vegetable garden, Salomón, who instructs him about pain and its release on the path of the sun. Tortuga's body is repaired by the chief surgeon, Dr. Steel, and tortured and retuned by an indomitable and sexually imposing female physio-therapist. In the course of his stay he falls in love with Ismelda, a nurse's aide who tells him that the mountain after which he is named is a giant turtle resting until the day it is stirred back to life to continue its migration northward. The shape and life of the mountain is enmeshed progressively with the life and health of its avatar. Tortuga, Ismelda, mountain, hot springs and recollection of migrations across the river valley collaborate in a myth of emergence, dispersal and return. The boy carries no other name in the story except that of the mountain, given him because his full body cast resembles a tortoise shell. Beginning his cure as the ontological tortoise — almost immobile, hard-shelled in spirit as well as body — he evolves in the course of his recovery into an avatar of the mountain's spirit, and when he finally goes home, released from his shell-like cast, he is ready to recover the promise latent in him.

The powers of the mountain and the myths of its participation are vertical backdrops for the horizontal narrative flow of Tortuga's confinement in a hospital which is filled as much with story as it is with suffering and dying children. In the hearse-converted-to-ambulance which brings him south, the hero is told the story of the mountain's magic. In his first dream in the hospital Salomón tells him the story of the failed turtle hunt ritual which immediately preceded his paralysis. Ancient mountain myth infused into recent event mirrors Momaday's mythological typologies; and, Salomón's story of his hunt initiation is another parabolic figuring of the inevitable spiritual confusion which attends emergence.

Later, Salomón tells Tortuga the story of the butterfly that laid eggs in the surgical aperture in his throat through which he breathes. Because of that extraordinary annunciation of love, butterflies soar from his throat in words, and like photons radiate from their unmoving solar center in the paralysed boy whose nickname is *Sol* "sun" (López 1990:218). Realizing the god within him, Salomón accepts pain without the heroic regret that Prometheus utters. Christ too, at the end, he explains to Tortuga, "fails us,

he turns and blames his father who has forsaken him." (160)¹² The ritual song that the Navajo boy Geronimo sings each morning to raise the sun adapts Salomón's myth to a local and topical ceremony:

"The sun is our father
 I walk in his path
 I walk in beauty . . .
 He is the fiery rider
 Who mounts the turtle
 Day by day . . ." (44)

Everyone in the hospital has a dream, a hope, memory of an accident or disease to make into story. Story is an escape vehicle for return along the path of the sun from physical and spiritual despair. Most of the storytelling in the wards, however, is desperate competition to amuse and entertain, to "kill time." There is even aggressive and willful resistance to believing story, as if belief were a painful fetter of commitment. It is precisely such a commitment, however, which gives purpose and makes salutary myth of that which is for some mere verbal dalliance.¹³

Released from his shell, mobile and ready to move north toward the turtle's mythic origin somewhere in Aztlán, Tortuga is on the ontological plane of the sun's path. Cut loose from his cast he is called *lagarto* by Ismelda, and when the two make love "like two naked lizards," Tortuga recalls that "we rose into the golden strands of light like two mating butterflies." (195) Just before his release from confinement, Tortuga receives in the mail the guitar with which the old blind Crispín of the

¹² Prometheus is an appropriate figure whose gift of light in the utilitarian form of fire contrasts with Salomón's gift of light as love. Salomón's stories and Tortuga's dream, like Momaday's personal recollections, are placed in italics to signal what Anaya himself calls "extra-reality." (Johnson and Apodaca 1990:434; Padilla 1990:232–33)

¹³ Jahner (Walker 1983:25), remarks that "no single category . . . encompasses all of those narratives that scholars label 'mythic,'" simply because there is no model for organization of such texts, and there is no self-conscious stylization of beliefs in them. Performances are not reduplicative and universal, but singular and personal. By my count there are over thirty distinct stories told in the hospital.

Albuquerque *barrio* sang in modern melody and lyric the songs of the ancient priests. With that guitar, as he travels northward at the very end of the story, Tortuga fulfills Salomón's last request to sing of love, and coordinates his body's shifting of shape with the reshaping of atavistic myth. The song of love he begins to sing as he heads home under the spring sun swelling life on the shell of the mountain is his own myth of emergence through stages of a broken family, broken body, and reptilian growths toward new being. Recovery requires a cataphoretic passage of story into damaged spiritual tissue. While verbal medicinal catalysts are common to many cultures, Anaya insists on a complete organic¹⁴ infusion of word into body. Singing, Tortuga begins to live the myth of his song.¹⁴

Anaya plays this metamorphic translation against the stale and spiritually debilitating atmosphere of the public hospital, a synecdoche for Anglo medical technology with its prisons of iron lungs, tortures of scalpel and suture, and anaesthetic texts. The most trivial and innocent of the latter is the comic book hoard which one boy hides like a treasure trove somewhere in the vegetable garden. More pernicious are the religious and political texts which torture the consciousness of Danny, a boy afflicted with a progressive decay of his arm. Although he is the one to name Tortuga (15) and is certain that belief in the mountain magic is a way to cure (34), Danny resents bitterly his own incapacity to believe what has not come to him through the stereotype voices of popular media. Unlike Geronimo who performs his grandfather's sun-rise ritual each morning, Danny cannot connect himself to the landscape and its sun, but only to advertized promises of science and faith he can neither understand nor manifest. He is, in short, a victim of the dehumanizing rationalism of Anglo culture. In desperate longing for cure, he orders from the Santuario de Chimayo a package of miraculous sand. That sand was magical for the Indian in the desert landscape before the church appropriated its powers, but the miracle of its cure in any system of belief requires a participation in

¹⁴ Anaya has said "I encounter myself in the myth. . . . The myths are a way of getting in touch with yourself, your real essence, what you really think of your nature." (Johnson and Apodaca 1990:427) Though there seems to be general consensus among readers that Tortuga has achieved a holistic cure, the fact that he can hardly move his wounded left hand, curiously neglected in his cure, when he leaves the hospital (169), is ominous.

the spirit of place. Danny's five dollars does not buy a mail order cure. Deprived of the land's restorative power and caught in the lure of the Church's gift of grace, he makes a symbolic gesture of rebellion against life itself by shutting off the electrical power which keeps the "vegetables" alive.¹⁵

A tragi-comic conflict between these cultural texts takes place when a group of patients watches the film *Frankenstein* on a Saturday outing in town. There is obvious tension in the confrontation between the child monsters of accident and disease and the fictional monster whose technological design is supposed to immune him to "natural" and social defects. In a wonderfully comic and moving scene, the crippled girls and boys perform an orgy before the screen, playing out in the dim the natural passions that the world at large prefers not to attribute to social marginals. The scientist of the film figures the Anglo demon of scientific and social progress which provides a charitable institution for crippled children and a governing board to take moral satisfaction in it. Dr. Frankenstein is recognized immediately by the children as their own Doctor Steel who cuts, patches and reshapes bodies; yet, though Steel's name and function identify him with the political establishment, he repairs wounds to the spirit as well as to the body. He is a figure of an unyielding good free of racial or social bias.¹⁶ Like Salomón, he knows the worth of pain. Predictably, he is blamed for the death of the vegetables and removed from his post by the State and its committee of overseers. The hospital committee which pretends to know what is "best" for the cripples under their charitable charge figures the society which isolates and neglects those who cannot or will not follow its rules for cultural participation.¹⁷

¹⁵ López points out that the Salomón Danny kills is reborn in Tortuga, "whose identity has disintegrated upon arrival at the hospital" (1990:222); but I see forms of Salomón in two figures: Tortuga, who inherits the song of love, and Danny, who after trying to surgically remove his own arm, awakes to speak wisdom in Salomón's voice (184).

¹⁶ The name *Steel* alludes to the steel pins with which he connects broken bones. They also recall the steel pins which are used in the form of a cross, to prevent the passage of witches, or *brujas*, in *Bless Me, Ultima*. Anaya speaks of steel as a material of new myths of Quetzalcoatl (Johnson and Apadoca 1990:426).

¹⁷ Anaya strategically avoids making his social criticism a specifically Chicano

The Way to Rainy Mountain and *Tortuga* are products of two very distinct Native American cultural experiences which perform similarly. In both novels, myth, landscape and voice collaborate in a movement from emergence through wandering to return. The voice of both narrators mediates between earlier voices – Ko-sahn and Salomón for example – and the voice of the printed text. The significant features of landscape which both voices invest with mythic significance are the same: river, mountain and sun.

The sun in both works carries particular mythic resonance. Anaya's path of the sun and Momaday's *Tai-me*, or Sun Dance doll, are ideas at the centre of a system of evolving myth. That fact does not make of their works, however, a "reversion" to paganism, but invites the reader to look anew with an unimpeded view at the compatibility of Anglo political, religious and social habits of thought with Native American traditions. While *The Way to Rainy Mountain* quite deliberately avoids any probing into the cultural motives of those who dispossess the Kiowa of the buffalo and ban their Sun Dance, *Tortuga* quite explicitly impugns the abstract and impersonal exercise of Catholic sacraments and icons, and the dehumanizing ministry of Anglo technology. What Anaya would do is recharge those institutions of science and religion with the rehabilitating force of the Native American's myths.

The individual voice singing mountain and sun into myth is an orphic art (Detienne 1979:68–94). Orpheus's own quest through the orbits of the planets and down to hell in quest of a lost harmony figures the migratory wanderings of the Native American in quest of his idea of self. The voices of Momaday and Anaya which recollect and reform fragments of the body of old and sacred myth, in which sun and mountain are diacritical marks like Geronimo's voice calling up the sun, reflect Orpheus's mountain-top call to his father, Apollo, from whom he receives his gift of poetry.¹⁸ His

cause. The story-telling sessions indicate that most but not all of the boys are Chicano, but besides song lyrics and names, Anaya keeps out of his story the Spanish language which is prominent in his earlier novels.

¹⁸ López 1990:220–21, sees something of Dionysian rites in *Tortuga*'s recollection of his First Communion. My impression of the Orphism in Anaya's text is independent of that insight. "Solar theology" (López 1990:217) is also Platonic, for

dismemberment is reflected in the fragmenting of Kiowa culture and the torturous tearing of Tortuga's body. The orphic recasting of the genealogies of the gods and rules of cultural participation are evident in Momaday's and Anaya's reshaping of myth. Orphism is voice itself. Writing it recalls the natural power of voice over disorder.

Recalling old myth is not for either writer a nostalgic turn toward the past, but a re-creating out of the past a way into the future. By translating the core myth of their cultural experience from one linguistic matrix into another, they negotiate the literary emergence of their oral traditions into print in a form which preserves their distinctive features. In this respect, Native American writing is a paradigm both of American cultural emergence in the Nineteenth Century and of its own quest for a return to its quintessential ideal.

the path of the sun which is love is Plato's fair bond of love which joins god and man in *Timaeus* 31b—c, and which Boethius, after Plato, identifies with the sun's rays in *De Consolatione*, Book II, Meter 8. Lady Philosophy's words might well be Salomón's:

O felix hominum genus
 Si vestros animos amor
 Quo caelum regitur regat.

"O happy would be the race of man if the love that rules the skies ruled his spirit."

Works Cited

- Anaya, Rudolfo A. *Bless Me, Ultima*. Berkeley: Tonatiuh-Quinto Sol, 1972.
- , *Heart of Aztlan*. Albuquerque: U. of New Mexico Press, 1976.
- , *The Silence of the Llano*. Berkeley, Cal.: Tonatiuh-Quinto Sol, 1982.
- , *Tortuga*. Berkeley, Cal.: Editorial Justa, 1979.
- , "Autobiography." Gonzalez-T. 359–88.
- Baker, Houston A., Jr., ed. *Three American Literatures*. New York: MLA, 1982.
- Detienne, Marcel. *Dionysos Slain*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1983.
- Original title *Dionysos mis à mort*. Paris: Gallimard, 1977.
- Dyk, Walter. *Son of Old Man Hat*. Lincoln, Neb.: U. of Nebraska Press, 1938.
- Eberenz, Rolf. "L'Espagnol et les langues indigènes dans l'Amérique coloniale: Les discours de la politique linguistique." *Etudes de Lettres*. Université de Lausanne, 1989: 87–117.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr., "Introduction: 'Tell Me, Sir, . . . What is "Black Literature?'" *PMLA* 105 (1990): 11–22.
- Gill, Sam D. *Mother Earth*. Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1987.
- , *Native American Traditions*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1983.
- González-T., César. Ed. *Rudolfo A. Anaya: Focus on Criticism*. La Jolla, California: Lalo Press, 1990.
- Isernhagen, Hartwig. "Anthropological Narrative and the Structure of North American Indian (Auto-)Biography." *The Structure of Texts*. Ed. Udo Fries. *SPELL* 3. Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1987: 221–33.
- Johnson, Charles. *Middle Passage*. New York: Atheneum, 1990.
- Johnson, David and David Apodaca. "Myth and the Writer: A Conversation with Rudolfo Anaya." Gonzalez-T. 414–38.
- Lincoln, Kenneth. "Native American Literatures: 'old like hills, like stars.'" Baker 80–167.
- López, María Elena. "Journey into the Heart of *Tortuga*." González-T. 205–30.
- Momaday, N. Scott. *The Ancient Child*. New York: Doubleday, 1989.
- , "The Man Made of Words." Gill 1983, 43–52.
- , *The Names*. New York: Harper and Row, 1976.
- , *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. Albuquerque: U. of New Mexico Press, 1969.

- Padilla, Ernesto. "Tortuga: The Black Sun of Salomón's Wards." González-T. 231-53.
- Schubnell, Mattias. *Scott Momaday: The Cultural and Literary Background*. Norman: U. of Oklahoma Press, 1985.
- Soyinka, Wole. "Twice Bitten: The Fate of Africa's Cultural Producers." *PMLA* 105 (1990): 110-20.
- Standiford, Lester A. "Worlds Made of Dawn: Characteristic Image and Incident in Native American Imaginative Literature." Baker 168-96.
- Stock, Brian. *Listening for the Text*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U. Press, 1990.
- Trimble, Stephen. *Talking with the Clay*. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1987.
- Walker, James. *Lakota Myth*. Ed. Elaine A. Jahner. Lincoln: U. of Nebraska Press, 1983.
- Welch, James. *The Death of Jim Loney*. N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1979.
- Witherspoon, Gary. *Language and Art in the Navajo Universe*. Ann-Arbor: U. of Michigan Press, 1977.