

Workshop Session 6

Cultural Studies: N. Scott Momaday and Russell Leong

Video Program Overview

Part I: Betty Tillman Samb's students study the mythological themes and historical shifts of Kiowa culture through N. Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. Part II: Bobbi Ciriza Houtchens and her students tour Los Angeles's Chinatown with poet Russell Leong and explore the relationship between poetry and Tai Chi. Leong shares his poem "Aerogrammes" and leads the class in creating Japanese *renga* poems.

Theory Overview

Cultural studies is an approach to examining the complex ways in which societal beliefs are formed. Focusing on the social divisions of class, gender, ethnicity, and race, this approach examines the ways in which meanings, stereotypes, and identities (both collective and individual) are generated within these social groups. The practice of cultural studies almost always involves the combination of otherwise discrete disciplines, including literature, sociology, education, history, philosophy, communications studies, and anthropology. Such an interdisciplinary approach is key to an understanding of these issues, because it allows students to study and compare multiple, varied texts that deal with the culture and history of a particular group.

Workshop Session (On-Site)

Getting Ready—Part I (15 minutes)

- Divide into small groups of three or four people.
- Share your thoughts about these questions:
 - What is the central idea of *The Way to Rainy Mountain*?
 - What did Momaday want readers to remember about his people, his grandmother, and their traditions?
- Compare the style and structure of various sections of this piece.

Watch Part I: N. Scott Momaday (approximately 30 minutes)

Going Further—Part I (15 minutes)

Discuss as many questions as time permits. You may want to answer more of the questions in your journals at home and share ideas on Channel-Talk.

- What do you think about Part I and the way in which the teacher used a cultural studies approach to the literature?
- How might you incorporate or adapt the strategies for use in your classroom?
- What are some other ways you might provide a cultural context for *The Way to Rainy Mountain*?
- What are some possible next steps to this lesson?

Getting Ready—Part II (15 minutes)

- Divide into small groups of three or four people.
- Share your coding of “Aerogrammes” (ideas, new information, and questions).

Watch Part II: Russell Leong (approximately 30 minutes)

Going Further—Part II (15 minutes)

Discuss as many questions as time permits. You may want to answer more of the questions in your journals at home and share ideas on Channel-Talk.

- What do you think about Part II and the way in which the teacher used a cultural studies approach to the literature?
- How might you provide a cultural context for your students if you don’t live near a “Chinatown”? Are there any “guides” in your community who might be resources?
- How might you incorporate or adapt the strategies for use in your classroom?
- What are so possible next steps to this lesson?

Between Sessions (On Your Own)

Homework Assignment

Go to the Web site at www.learner.org/channel/workshops/hslit and:

- Review Workshop Session 6: read the theory overview, teaching strategies, information about the authors and literature, lesson plans, and resources.
- Prepare for Workshop Session 7: preview the theory overview and information about the authors and literature (biographies, synopses of works, Q&As, key references, and resources).

In the Readings and the texts from the Reading List following Workshop Session 7:

- Read: Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and Ruthanne Lum McCunn's *Thousand Pieces of Gold* (if you are unable to read both works, read the first three chapters of each novel).
- Read: the related texts that teacher Sandra Childs assigned for her lesson on *Thousand Pieces of Gold* (available in the Workshop Session 7 Readings).
- As you read *Parable of the Sower* (or chapters from the novel) and the online materials, consider the following questions:
 - What are the similarities between 2025 and the present?
 - How would you characterize the author's politics?
 - How might you respond to the work's "call to action"?
- As you read *Thousand Pieces of Gold*, the related texts, and the online information, consider the following questions:
 - What are your reactions to Lalu's foot-binding?
 - How do the related texts explore the politics of beauty in contemporary America—what are the cross-cultural patterns?
 - How would you characterize the author's politics?
 - How might you respond to the work's "call to action"?
- Bring your notes to the next workshop session.

Ongoing Activities

- In your journal, include thoughts, ideas, or questions you might have as you review the online materials and reflect on the workshop session. Make note of how your participation in the session influenced any experiences in your classroom.
- Online, click on Reflection/Interactive Forum, an activity that you can use to interpret poems using the pedagogical approaches covered in this workshop. Read one of the two poems featured and respond to the *cultural studies* questions. Share your answers on the discussion board.
- Share ideas on Channel-Talkhslit@learner.org.

Workshop Session 6 Readings

Aerogrammes

After a trip to Sunwui County, Guangdong, China, 1984

Par avion,
via airmail,
hung-kung:
Only after I returned
to L.A. did China
collapse in my hand—
folded, sealed,
glued and stamped
westward.
I did not ask to be followed.
But someone's village childhood,
spent among the palmettos,
pigs and orange groves
of the Pearl River Delta
caught up with me
generations later.

Now, five blue- and red-striped
aerogrammes corner my desk,
airmail-stickered
in French, English and Chinese
addressing my journey to Sunwui.

In Canton city
the words of the woman driver
dart past my ears:
"Don't get your relatives Marlboros—
Why spoil them!
Local cigarettes are good enough—
and good for the economy!"

"Aerogrammes" by Russell Leong is reprinted with permission from the publisher of *The Country of Dreams and Dust* (Albuquerque: West End Press, 1994)

Workshop Session 6 Readings, cont'd.

"How 'bout a chicken?"
I ask.

"Wait and see—
you may not like
your country cousins!"
I slip four cartons—
two American brand
and two Chinese—
into my bag anyway.

Harvest is over by December.
Along the pockmarked roads,
men knee-deep in winter mud
fill ditches, repair dikes.

Traffic holds us up—
I give her a piece of my mind.
"When I was young in America,
we believed in Mao,
revolution, socialism.
Now China travels the capitalist road.
What should we believe?"

She laughs.
"We never had ships
searching for spices or gold,
or far-flung empires built on slaves.
But a little capitalism today
is a good tonic to cure feudal ideas!"
She sips a Coca-Cola
I buy at the roadside stand.

Traffic unsnarls—
we reach Sunwui
where she leaves me
to a local fellow from the village clan.

In the clan hall,
around a wooden table,
the elders tug at stray whiskers
in thought.
From my pocket, I fetch
a black and white photo
of my father from World War II.
"Does anyone here remember this man?"
They pick at the image
like scab off memory,
narrow their vision
down to the eye,
recap their stories
down to the tooth.

No, no; yes, yes.
Forward and backward
they lead me through alleyways
smelling of fish and oranges
to a small house.
I open the door.
My father stares down
from a wartime portrait on the wall.
I cannot deny the relation
when all the children
in the room
suddenly chime "Uncle."

AEROGRAMME ONE: LOS ANGELES

I confess
I did not open the first letter
for a week. Not that I feared
using a dictionary,
but the eight-legged ideograms

Workshop Session 6 Readings, cont'd.

were like crabs
scuttling after my past.

"Your cousins and nephews
were happy to scatter wine
with you over the ancestral hillside..."
the letter began.
(I see them hack away
the green thicket
clearing a path to bring gravestone
markers to light. They hadn't
climbed here in months, or more.)

Later, between spats
at tin spittoons,
they splatter me with questions.
"How old are you?
Are you married?
How many sons did your father have?
Are they married?"

They press
bags of dried orange peel at me.
I answer them with wine,
cigarettes, and money.

AEROGRAMME TWO

Your relatives in Sunwui County
wish good health to you,
to your mother and brother.
By the way, you know that
free enterprise is alive and well
in China, indeed
we would like to open a
dry goods shop.

But we lack capital.
Send as much as you can spare."

They did not name a figure,
leaving it to my guilt or grace.
But I admitted none, for once,
in Sunwui city, the county capital,
I saw a photo exhibit of toothy Chinese
from Indonesia, Canada,
Singapore and San Francisco.

They had invested dollars
in a primary school here,
a textile factory there.
But I had no coined
compatriotism to tender.

Instead, I sent them a photo
I had taken
of my old village uncle, the one
in the polaroid wearing
the hand-me-down jacket, earmuffs
and torn green sneakers.

"Buy him and auntie winter coats
and divide the rest of the money,"
I wrote.

From the good side of his face
that was not twisted by stroke,
he looks me straight in the eye,
beyond a cold morning
to a day right after the War.
"In 1947," he says, "I was sixteen.
Standing by the riverbank,
I waited patiently for the ferry
to come upstream,

Workshop Session 6 Readings, cont'd.

carrying U.N. rations and your father.
He was the first from California
to step upon village soil
after the Japanese
laid down their guns.
He came, ate, sprinkled
American scotch and water
on the gravestones
and left.
Months later, he sent us that picture
of himself in a G.I. uniform.
We never heard from him again."

I blame the Cold War.
My uncle nods.
And when I tell him that father
has just died,
he shakes his head
without surprise.

AEROGRAMME THREE

"Greetings
from the factory cooperative
in Sunwui city. The family,"
my nephew began,
"hopes to buy a government
condominium.
Please send five thousand dollars U.S.
tomorrow."

I took it in stride.
Checked the horoscope
in the *L.A. Times*,
but Virgo refused to speculate
that far.

Consulted close friends.
The ones from China said:
"Send the money."
The ones from America said
"Crazy, man."
I had split vision.
In my left eye—
a new village house—
yellow tiles, concrete block walls,
a slab wall without cracks.
Running water, interior pipes
and light bulbs
electrifying every room.

In my right eye—
a Los Angeles barrio—
red spanish tiles aglow
over a stucco bungalow
leaning from the last earthquake.
Palm trees, taco trucks,
smoggy orange sunsets—
at thirty times the price
of a condo in Canton.
I winced.
Waited.
Wavered.
Calculated mortgage points,
exchange rates:
four U.S. dollars
to one Chinese.

Procrastination sped me
to the new year,
forced open my hand.
I telexed money from L.A. Chinatown—
to Hong Kong, to Canton,
to Sunwui village.

Workshop Session 6 Readings, cont'd.

A token, less
than what they wanted
after finding that
they stood second, or third,
on the family tree.
Not in direct line from grandfather,
but offshoots,
concocted further back.

AEROGRAMME FOUR

"Dear cousin in Los Angeles,
we pen this letter on behalf of your aunt,
who went with us
to sweep family graves again.
We chopped our way
through last year's branches
and wondered when you would return.

For, as fate had it,
as she climbed down the hill,
Auntie met a young lass,
still single
and supple as a willow.
It's time to start a family,
agreed?"

Struck by the thought,
I slid into my '71 Ford Maverick
and cruised down Hollywood Boulevard.
Hookers of both sexes
were walking nowhere,
squinting against the sun
at four in the afternoon.

AEROGRAMME FIVE

Differed from the rest.
The writing quicker.
"Sir,
I know it's bold
of me to write you.
I'll be twenty-two this year.
Didn't your auntie tell you
we met on the mountain?
I apologize
for my lack of schooling;
I'm a country girl.
But I'm healthy,
and you're of age.
If you want to see
me the next time you return,
please answer my letter."

On the upper left corner,
a two-inch photo
of a ten-story hotel
topped by a revolving restaurant
above the palmettos
and orange groves
caught my eye.
Where was her face?

This is the last aerogramme
I've received so far.
I never showed them to anyone,
though upon my return
I had pressed the polaroids,
like leaves, into an album.

"They look like real Chinese peasants,
don't they!" my mother said.

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"You should see Sunwui one day,"

I told my brother.

"Someday," he said.

Flattened and forgotten,

the aerogrammes

lost their edge

until yesterday.

The *New York Times* reported

that the People's Republic—

through a U.S. Chinese businessman—

planned to export

Chinese workers to harvest

American farms.

This is what he said:

"Exporting workers

is like exporting oil

or silk slippers."

But what we need now is bodies—

he meant to say.

His words hit dirt,

reviving my suspicions.

Maybe matters

like aerogrammes,

family reunions,

gravesweeping

and revolving restaurants

rising from the delta mud

were just concessions

for export—

like oil or silk slippers.

Only

after I returned from China

did the idea collapse in my head:

I swore off

grimy ancestral markers.

I wrote off filial piety

as useless,

a fallen branch.

Yet

as keenly

as the blade

of the letter opener

that falls upon my hand,

I await the arrival

of the next

immutable

aerogramme.

Workshop Session 6 Readings, cont'd.

The Way to Rainy Mountain, Excerpt 1

INTRODUCTION

A SINGLE KNOLL rises out of the plain in Oklahoma, north and west of the Wichita Range. For my people, the Kiowas, it is an old landmark, and they gave it the name Rainy Mountain. The hardest weather in the world is there. Winter brings blizzards, hot tornado winds arise in the spring, and in summer the prairie is an anvil's edge. The grass turns brittle and brown, and it cracks beneath your feet. There are green belts along the rivers and creeks, linear groves of hickory and pecan, willow and witch hazel. At a distance in July or August the streaming foliage seems almost to writhe in fire. Great green and yellow grasshoppers are everywhere in the tall grass, popping up like corn to sting the flesh, and tortoises crawl about on the red earth, going nowhere in the plenty of time. Loneliness is an aspect of the land. All things in the plain are isolated; there is no confusion of objects in the eye, but *one* hill or *one* tree or *one* man. To look upon that landscape in the early morning, with the sun at your back, is to lose the sense of proportion. Your imagination comes to life, and this, you think, is where Creation was begun.

I returned to Rainy Mountain in July. My grandmother had died in the spring, and I wanted to be at her grave. She had lived to be very old and at last infirm. Her only living daughter was with her when she died, and I was told that in death her face was that of a child.

THE WAY TO RAINY MOUNTAIN



Excerpts from *The Way to Rainy Mountain* by N. Scott Momaday are reprinted with permission from the publisher (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001)

Workshop Session 6 Readings, cont'd.

I like to think of her as a child. When she was born, the Kiowas were living the last great moment of their history. For more than a hundred years they had controlled the open range from the Smoky Hill River to the Red, from the headwaters of the Canadian to the fork of the Arkansas and Cimarron. In alliance with the Comanches, they had ruled the whole of the southern Plains. War was their sacred business, and they were among the finest horsemen the world has ever known. But warfare for the Kiowas was preeminently a matter of disposition rather than of survival, and they never understood the grim, unrelenting advance of the U.S. Cavalry. When at last, divided and ill-provisioned, they were driven onto the Staked Plains in the cold rains of autumn, they fell into panic. In Palo Duro Canyon they abandoned their crucial stores to pillage and had nothing then but their lives. In order to save themselves, they surrendered to the soldiers at Fort Sill and were imprisoned in the old stone corral that now stands as a military museum. My grandmother was spared the humiliation of those high gray walls by eight or ten years, but she must have known from birth the affliction of defeat, the dark brooding of old warriors.

Her name was Aho, and she belonged to the last culture to evolve in North America. Her forebears came down from the high country in western Montana nearly three centuries ago. They were a mountain people, a mysterious tribe of hunters whose language has never been positively classified in any major group. In the late seventeenth century they began a long migration to the south and east. It was a journey toward the dawn, and it led to a golden age. Along the way the Kiowas were befriended by the Crows, who gave them the culture and religion of the Plains. They acquired horses, and their ancient nomadic spirit was suddenly free of the ground. They acquired Tai-me, the sacred Sun Dance doll, from that moment the object and symbol of their worship, and so shared in the divinity of the sun. Not least, they acquired the sense of destiny, therefore courage and pride. When they entered upon the southern Plains they had been transformed. No longer

were they slaves to the simple necessity of survival; they were a lordly and dangerous society of fighters and thieves, hunters and priests of the sun. According to their origin myth, they entered the world through a hollow log. From one point of view, their migration was the fruit of an old prophecy, for indeed they emerged from a sunless world.

Although my grandmother lived out her long life in the shadow of Rainy Mountain, the immense landscape of the continental interior lay like memory in her blood. She could tell of the Crows, whom she had never seen, and of the Black Hills, where she had never been. I wanted to see in reality what she had seen more perfectly in the mind's eye, and traveled fifteen hundred miles to begin my pilgrimage.

Yellowstone, it seemed to me, was the top of the world, a region of deep lakes and dark timber, canyons and waterfalls. But, beautiful as it is, one might have the sense of confinement there. The skyline in all directions is close at hand, the high wall of the woods and deep cleavages of shade. There is a perfect freedom in the mountains, but it belongs to the eagle and the elk, the badger and the bear. The Kiowas reckoned their stature by the distance they could see, and they were bent and blind in the wilderness.

Descending eastward, the highland meadows are a stairway to the plain. In July the inland slope of the Rockies is luxuriant with flax and buckwheat, stonecrop and larkspur. The earth unfolds and the limit of the land recedes. Clusters of trees, and animals grazing far in the distance, cause the vision to reach away and wonder to build upon the mind. The sun follows a longer course in the day, and the sky is immense beyond all comparison. The great billowing clouds that sail upon it are shadows that move upon the grain like water, dividing light. Farther down, in the land of the Crows and Blackfeet, the plain is yellow. Sweet clover takes hold of the hills and bends upon itself to cover and seal the soil. There the Kiowas paused on their way; they had come to the place where they must change their lives. The sun is at home on the plains. Precisely there does it have the certain character of a god. When the Kiowas came to the land of the

Workshop Session 6 Readings, cont'd.

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Crows, they could see the dark lees of the hills at dawn across the Bighorn River, the profusion of light on the grain shelves, the oldest deity ranging after the solstices. Not yet would they veer southward to the caldron of the land that lay below; they must wean their blood from the northern winter and hold the mountains a while longer in their view. They bore Tai-me in procession to the east.

A dark mist lay over the Black Hills, and the land was like iron. At the top of a ridge I caught sight of Devil's Tower upthrust against the gray sky as if in the birth of time the core of the earth had broken through its crust and the motion of the world was begun. 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 they could not do otherwise, the Kiowas made a legend at the base of the rock. My grandmother said:

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

From that moment, and so long as the legend lives, the Kiowas have kinsmen in the night sky. Whatever they were in the mountains, they could be no more. However tenuous their well-being, however much they had suffered and would suffer again, they had found a way out of the wilderness.

My grandmother had a reverence for the sun, a holy regard that now is all but gone out of mankind. There was a wariness in her, and

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Workshop Session 6 Readings, cont'd.

an ancient awe. She was a Christian in her later years, but she had come a long way about, and she never forgot her birthright. As a child she had been to the Sun Dances; she had taken part in those annual rites, and by them she had learned the restoration of her people in the presence of Tai-me. She was about seven when the last Kiowa Sun Dance was held in 1887 on the Washita River above Rainy Mountain Creek. The buffalo were gone. In order to consummate the ancient sacrifice—to impale the head of a buffalo bull upon the medicine tree—a delegation of old men journeyed into Texas, there to beg and barter for an animal from the Goodnight herd. She was ten when the Kiowas came together for the last time as a living Sun Dance culture. They could find no buffalo; they had to hang an old hide from the sacred tree. Before the dance could begin, a company of soldiers rode out from Fort Sill under orders to disperse the tribe. Forbidden without cause the essential act of their faith, having seen the wild herds slaughtered and left to rot upon the ground, the Kiowas backed away forever from the medicine tree. That was July 20, 1890, at the great bend of the Washita. My grandmother was there. Without bitterness, and for as long as she lived, she bore a vision of decide.

Now that I can have her only in memory, I see my grandmother in the several postures that were peculiar to her: standing at the wood stove on a winter morning and turning meat in a great iron skillet; sitting at the south window, bent above her beadwork, and afterwards, when her vision failed, looking down for a long time into the fold of her hands; going out upon a cane, very slowly as she did when the weight of age came upon her; praying. I remember her most often at prayer. She made long, rambling prayers out of suffering and hope, having seen many things. I was never sure that I had the right to hear, so exclusive were they of all mere custom and company. The last time I saw her she prayed standing by the side of her bed at night, naked to the waist, the light of a kerosene lamp moving upon her dark skin. Her long, black hair, always drawn and braided in the day, lay upon her shoulders and against her breasts like a shawl. I do not speak

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Kiowa, and I never understood her prayers, but there was something inherently sad in the sound, some merest hesitation upon the syllables of sorrow. She began in a high and descending pitch, exhausting her breath to silence; then again and again—and always the same intensity of effort, of something that is, and is not, like urgency in the human voice. Transported so in the dancing light among the shadows of her room, she seemed beyond the reach of time. But that was illusion; I think I knew then that I should not see her again.

Houses are like sentinels in the plain, old keepers of the weather watch. There, in a very little while, wood takes on the appearance of great age. All colors wear soon away in the wind and rain, and then the wood is burned gray and the grain appears and the nails turn red with rust. The windowpanes are black and opaque; you imagine there is nothing within, and indeed there are many ghosts, bones given up to the land. They stand here and there against the sky, and you approach them for a longer time than you expect. They belong in the distance; it is their domain.

Once there was a lot of sound in my grandmother's house, a lot of coming and going, feasting and talk. The summers there were full of excitement and reunion. The Kiowas are a summer people; they abide the cold and keep to themselves, but when the season turns and the land becomes warm and vital they cannot hold still; an old love of going returns upon them. The aged visitors who came to my grandmother's house when I was a child were made of lean and leather, and they bore themselves upright. They wore great black hats and bright ample shirts that shook in the wind. They rubbed fat upon their hair and wound their braids with strips of colored cloth. Some of them painted their faces and carried the scars of old and cherished enmities. They were an old council of warlords, come to remind and be reminded of who they were. Their wives and daughters served them well. The women might indulge themselves; gossip was at once the mark and compensation of their servitude. They made loud and elaborate talk among themselves, full of jest and gesture, fright and

THE WAY TO RAINY MOUNTAIN



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false alarm. They went abroad in fringed and flowered shawls, bright beadwork and German silver. They were at home in the kitchen, and they prepared meals that were banquets.

There were frequent prayer meetings, and great nocturnal feasts. When I was a child I played with my cousins outside, where the lamplight fell upon the ground and the singing of the old people rose up around us and carried away into the darkness. There were a lot of good things to eat, a lot of laughter and surprise. And afterwards, when the quiet returned, I lay down with my grandmother and could hear the frogs away by the river and feel the motion of the air.

Now there is a funeral silence in the rooms, the endless wake of some final word. The walls have closed in upon my grandmother's house. When I returned to it in mourning, I saw for the first time in my life how small it was. It was late at night, and there was a white moon, nearly full. I sat for a long time on the stone steps by the kitchen door. From there I could see out across the land; I could see the long row of trees by the creek, the low light upon the rolling plains, and the stars of the Big Dipper. Once I looked at the moon and caught sight of a strange thing. A cricket had perched upon the handrail, only a few inches away from me. My line of vision was such that the creature filled the moon like a fossil. It had gone there, I thought, to live and die, for there, of all places, was its small definition made whole and eternal. A warm wind rose up and purled like the longing within me.

The next morning I awoke at dawn and went out on the dirt road to Rainy Mountain. It was already hot, and the grasshoppers began to fill the air. Still, it was early in the morning, and the birds sang out of the shadows. The long yellow grass on the mountain shone in the bright light, and a scissortail hied above the land. There, where it ought to be, at the end of a long and legendary way, was my grandmother's grave. Here and there on the dark stones were ancestral names. Looking back once, I saw the mountain and came away.

N. Scott Momaday



Workshop Session 6 Readings, cont'd.

The Way to Rainy Mountain, Excerpt 2

VI

The sun's child was big enough to walk around on the earth, and he saw a camp nearby. He made his way to it and saw that a great spider—that which is called a grandmother—lived there. The spider spoke to the sun's child, and the child was afraid. The grandmother was full of resentment; she was jealous, you see, for the child had not yet been weaned from its mother's breasts. She wondered whether the child were a boy or a girl, and therefore she made two things, a pretty ball and a bow and arrows. These things she left alone with the child all the next day. When she returned, she saw that the ball was full of arrows, and she knew then that the child was a boy and that he would be hard to raise. Time and again the grandmother tried to capture the boy, but he always ran away. Then one day she made a snare out of rope. The boy was caught up in the snare, and he cried and cried, but the grandmother sang to him and at last he fell asleep.

Go to sleep and do not cry.

*Your mother is dead, and still you
feed upon her breasts.*

Oo-oo-la-la-la-la, oo-oo.

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THE WAY TO RAINY MOUNTAIN

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In the autumn of 1874, the Kiowas were driven southward towards the Staked Plains. Columns of troops were converging upon them from all sides, and they were bone-weary and afraid. They camped on Elk Creek, and the next day it began to rain. It rained hard all that day, and the Kiowas waited on horseback for the weather to clear. Then, as evening came on, the earth was suddenly crawling with spiders, great black tarantulas, swarming on the flood.

I know of spiders. There are dirt roads in the Plains. You see them, and you wonder where and how far they go. They seem very old and untraveled, as if they all led away to deserted houses. But creatures cross these roads: dung beetles and grasshoppers, sidewinders and tortoises. Now and then there comes a tarantula, at evening, always larger than you imagine, dull and dark brown, covered with long, dusty hairs. There is something crotchety about them; they stop and go and angle away.

Workshop Session 6 Readings, cont'd.

The Way to Rainy Mountain, Excerpt 3

VII

The years went by, and the boy still had the ring which killed his mother. The grandmother spider told him never to throw the ring into the sky, but one day he threw it up, and it fell squarely on top of his head and cut him in two. He looked around, and there was another boy, just like himself, his twin. The two of them laughed and laughed, and then they went to the grandmother spider. She nearly cried aloud when she saw them, for it had been hard enough to raise the one. Even so, she cared for them well and made them fine clothes to wear.

Mammedy owned horses. And he could remember that it was essentially good to own horses, that it was hard to be without horses. There was a day: Mammedy got down from a horse for the last time. Of all the tribes of the Plains, the Kiowas owned the greatest number of horses per person.

On summer afternoons I went swimming in the Washita River. The current was slow, and the warm, brown water seemed to be standing still. It was a secret place. There in the deep shade, enclosed in the dense, overhanging growth of the banks, my mind fixed on the wings of a dragonfly or the flitting motion of a water strider, the great open land beyond was all but impossible to imagine. But it was there, a stone's throw away. Once, from the limb of a tree, I saw myself in the brown water; then a frog leaped from the bank, breaking the image apart.



Workshop Session 6 Readings, cont'd.

VIII

Now each of the twins had a ring, and the grandmother spider told them never to throw the rings into the sky. But one day they threw them up into the high wind. The rings rolled over a hill, and the twins ran after them. They ran beyond the top of the hill and fell down into the mouth of a cave. There lived a giant and his wife. The giant had killed a lot of people in the past by building fires and filling the cave with smoke, so that the people could not breathe. Then the twins remembered something that the grandmother spider had told them: "If ever you get caught in the cave, say to yourselves the word thain-mom, 'above my eyes.'" When the giant began to set fires around, the twins repeated the word thain-mom over and over to themselves, and the smoke remained above their eyes. When the giant had made three great clouds of smoke, his wife saw that the twins sat without coughing or crying, and she became frightened. "Let them go," she said, "or something bad will happen to us." The twins took up their rings and returned to the grandmother spider. She was glad to see them.

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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. And the word is sacred. A man's name is his own; he can keep it or give it away as he likes. Until recent times, the Kiowas would not speak the name of a dead man. To do so would have been disrespectful and dishonest. The dead take their names with them out of the world.

When Aho saw or heard or thought of something bad, she said the word zei-dl-bei, "frightful." It was the one word with which she confronted evil and the incomprehensible. I liked her to say it, for she screwed up her face in a wonderful look of displeasure and clicked her tongue. It was not an exclamation so much, I think, as it was a warding off, an exertion of language upon ignorance and disorder.

THE WAY TO RAINY MOUNTAIN

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Workshop Session 6 Readings, cont'd.

IX

The next thing that happened to the twins was this: They killed a great snake which they found in their tipi. When they told the grandmother spider what they had done, she cried and cried. They had killed their grandfather, she said. And after that the grandmother spider died. The twins wrapped her in a hide and covered her with leaves by the water. The twins lived on for a long time, and they were greatly honored among the Kiowas.

In another and perhaps older version of the story, it is a porcupine and not a redbird that is the representation of the sun. In that version, too, one of the twins is said to have walked into the waters of a lake and disappeared forever, while the other at last transformed himself into ten portions of "medicine," thereby giving of his own body in eucharistic form to the Kiowas. The ten bundles of the *talyi-da-i*, "boy medicine" are, like the Tai-me, chief objects of religious veneration.

When he was a boy, my father went with his grandmother, Keahdinekeh, to the shrine of one of the talyi-da-i. The old woman made an offering of bright cloth, and she prayed. The shrine was a small, specially-made tipi; inside, suspended from the lashing of the poles, was the medicine itself. My father knew that it was very powerful, and the very sight of it filled him with wonder and regard. The holiness of such a thing can be imparted to the human spirit, I believe, for I remember that it shone in the sightless eyes of Keahdinekeh. Once I was taken to see her at the old house on the other side of Rainy Mountain Creek. The room was dark, and her old age filled it like a substance. She was white-haired and blind, and, in that strange reversion that comes upon the very old, her skin was as soft as the skin of a baby. I remember the sound of her glad weeping and the water-like touch of her hand.

Workshop Session 6 Reading List

Leong, Russell. "Aerogrammes," from *The Country of Dreams and Dust*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994. ASIN: 0931122767

Momaday, N. Scott. *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press; Reprint edition, 2001. ISBN: 0826304362

Notes
