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Reading from the Heart Out: Chief Bromden through Indigenous Eyes

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Abstract

This essay offers a re-reading of an American classic—Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*—that rejects the conventional interpretation, one which positions the white protagonist McMurphy as the secular iconoclastic hero bravely enacting an existential drama. Instead, this reading pursues an interpretation that explores the implications and ironies of Kesey’s choice to narrate his novel from the perspective of the Native American Chief Bromden. By choosing a traditionally marginalized member of society to offer a social critique, Kesey is able to redirect our attention away from an interpretation that focuses on the incoherent ramblings of a presumed schizophrenic and towards a multi-vocal perspective intrinsic to the traditional worldview that Bromden inherited as his Chinook birthright. This reader, therefore, suggests a reconsideration not just of Kesey’s novel but of the way we read any text that engages an indigenous point of view. This interpretation is supported in several ways but primarily by the example of the Kiowa writer N. Scott Momaday, whose memoir *The Way to Rainy Mountain* provides a model for a reading Kesey’s novel through indigenous eyes.

Keywords

indigenous, Chief Bromden, Kesey, Momaday, sacred, mythic,
imagination, multi-vocal perspective

We are what we imagine.
Our very existence consists in our imagination
of ourselves.

—N. Scott Momaday

Speaking to the Convocation of American Indian Scholars, Kiowa writer N. Scott Momaday observed: “We are what we imagine. Our very existence consists in our imagination of ourselves” (80). Momaday’s invitation to consider the role imagination plays in shaping Indian identity is coupled with his warning that “the greatest tragedy that can befall us is to go unimagined” (Vizenor 107). Using Momaday’s wisdom as a guide, this analysis offers a re-reading of an American classic—Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*—that rejects conventional interpretations that position the white protagonist McMurphy as the secular iconoclastic hero bravely enacting an existential drama. Instead, this reading substitutes an interpretation that views Chief Bromden not as a hopelessly trapped schizophrenic but as a wounded Chinook, one who is recovering his ability to imagine himself and the world around him in terms of the mythic worldview of his Indian inheritance rather than as defined by the norms of the dominant culture.¹

As one member of an ad hoc “tribe” of patients in a mental institution, what we know of the narrator comes to us in flashbacks while he relates the story of Randall P. McMurphy’s appearance in his life. Bromden is a long-term patient who most literary critics describe as a paranoid schizophrenic. He describes himself as a 280 pound, 6’8” Indian of mixed heritage whose identity has broken down due to the pressure of social and familial forces. He is the son of the once-powerful Chinook tribal chief, “The Pine that ‘Stands Tallest on the Mountain,’” but his mother, whose surname he bears, was white. He grew up in an Indian village on the banks of the Columbia River in Oregon, land Indians were forced to sell to accommodate a dam which eventually destroyed his father’s primary means of livelihood, salmon fishing. As a result, his father lost his tribal status and his pride, and died an alcoholic.

Bromden, meanwhile, tried to adapt to the white world: he played high school football, briefly attended college, and engaged in combat during World War II. Nonetheless he experienced a psychotic breakdown while on a military base, and when the narrative begins he has already spent 20 years in a mental ward. As a

¹ I would like to express my appreciation to Daniel Wildcat of Haskell Indian Nations University for his inspiration, guidance, and encouragement as I crafted this essay.

response to both his institutionalization and the internalization of his invisibility in the white world, he literally cuts himself off, feigning dumbness and deafness. Seen by society as incurable, in the mental hospital he is known as “Chief Broom” because he is constantly sweeping the floor. Yet his janitorial chores give him access to many conversations and endow him with a perspective that uniquely positions him as the narrator of events. As a result, Bromden sees what others cannot. For most readers such a viewpoint suggests psychosis, but from the perspective of an Indian who knows that the exercise of our imagination is necessary to our very existence, Bromden’s narration carries the visionary insights of one who is avoiding the tragedy of an unimagined life.

Kesey’s novel traces the stages of Bromden’s transformation, beginning with the arrival on the ward of a new admission, McMurphy, and ending with the narrator’s escape from the hospital. In addition to telling his own story, Bromden, who has been there longer than any of the other patients, functions as the keeper of tribal lore, particularly during the climactic weeks of McMurphy’s (Mac’s) uprising against Miss Ratched, the “Big Nurse” who runs the psychiatric ward by means of a dehumanizing and repressive regime. Mac’s revolt leads the hospital to take drastic action, and after a lobotomy has reduced him to a vegetable, Mac is mercifully killed by Bromden. Still, McMurphy’s bold defiance of the hospital’s power structure serves as a catalyst for Bromden, awakening his own desire for freedom. He now summons up the will to do what he could have done all along: he escapes from the hospital so that he may face the outside world again and tell his story.

A product of its time—the anti-authoritarian and iconoclastic sixties in the U.S.A.—Kesey’s novel valorizes rebellion against an oppressive system. In particular, it reflects contemporary dissatisfaction with established psychiatric practices, such as lobotomy and electroconvulsive therapy, institutionalization, and over-reliance on drugs. Moreover, Kesey chooses as his narrator a traditionally marginalized member of American society. While Bromden’s mode of narration has generally been taken as that of an incoherent, rambling schizophrenic—a reading which correlates the isolation of insanity with social-political marginalization—I believe that Kesey is giving us here a multi-vocal perspective, one intrinsic to the traditional worldview that Bromden inherited as his Chinook birthright.

This indigenous perspective, rooted in a mythic worldview fueled by an active and credible imagination, offers a model for an interpretive approach that in fact holds several perspectives in tension when evaluating experience and its textual representation. To appreciate an indigenous point of view, a reader must balance the orientation of the outsider and the insider, the worldview of the indigenous and the

immigrant, the emic and the etic perspectives. This reverses the conventional order of investigation: rather than seeing in order to believe, one must believe in order to see, a fundamentally native way of moving through reality.

Kesey's narrative technique in the novel gives form, after all, to what anthropologist Victor Turner would call the "social drama" that was unfolding during the American 1960s and 70s. In his study of the symbolic meaning of human actions, Turner probed the ways in which social actions of various kinds acquire a kind of dramatic form through "the metaphors and paradigms" in people's or "actor's" heads. These paradigms, Turner notes, are "put there by explicit teaching and implicit generalization from social experience," and in certain intensive or conflict-ridden circumstances generate new forms and metaphors to reflect social concerns (*Dramas* 13). Intensive periods of social drama arise when a given society is "betwixt and between" agreed upon systems of order, in a state Turner defines as "liminality." Liminality offers an escape from the current structures of society, or at least from one's place in them. In a liminal state one can stand outside personal and social positions to formulate alternative social arrangements and encourage others to assent to innovation. Furthermore, while these times invite innovation, they also become occasions to reaffirm "root paradigms"—spiritual and philosophical values—and to reinvest them with meaning (*Dramas* 32).

Americans in the 1960s were becoming increasingly conscious of the pluralism of their own society as the aspirations of marginalized communities increasingly challenged the dominant class, some of whose members continued to practice the accepted methods of enslavement and commodification. Alternatively some, like Kesey, deliberately sought encounters with "otherness" by various means, in particular actual travel—as when Kesey journeyed with the Merry Pranksters on the fabled bus *Further*, as documented by Tom Wolf in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*—and psychological adventuring through hallucinogenic drugs like LSD ("acid"), as a way to achieve an altered state of consciousness.²

Indeed, Kesey's biography further supports an "indigenous" interpretation of Bromley's narrative mode in *Cuckoo's Nest*. Robert Stone spoke of his friend Ken Kesey and the era they shared in his essay "The Prince of Possibility." "We were all a little drunk on possibility. Things were speeding out of control before we could define them. Those who cared most deeply about the changes, those who gave their

² It is also worth noting that the efforts of Kesey and other Beat writers who turned to Native American, Eastern, and other non-European sources for spiritual and philosophical enlightenment preceded the backlash that hit white writers like William Styron, who was criticized for his appropriation of black culture in his portrayal of Nat Turner. Kesey's breezy adaptation of multicultural influences apparently encountered no criticism.

lives to them, were, I think, the most deceived.” He continues, observing that among their tribe, it was Kesey who “kept trying to find the message beyond the words, to see the words that God had written in fire . . . progressively revealed in mythology in his novels. All his life he searched for the philosopher’s stone that could return the world to the pure story from which it was made” (87).

As one who cared deeply about the possibilities of change, it is significant that Stone would cite mythology as the genre most central to Kesey’s writing. In contemporary mainstream societies, mythology is not often associated with the search for truth; in indigenous cultures, however, it may be the highest form of truth. Although the novel’s plot was based on actual people Kesey experienced during his time working at a mental hospital, according to most sources Kesey was stuck in his writing of the novel until he got the inspiration to narrate the story from the personal viewpoint of Chief Bromden. Bromden was the character who could “return the world to pure story.”

Chief Bromden narrates, however, in ways that continually confuse the reader until he comes to appreciate how the logic of storytelling characteristic of a native point of view can manipulate different modes of discourse. Sometimes Bromden recalls his own past experience and his interpretations of the experiences of others but places the narration in the present tense, as if the action were immediate and ongoing; other times he provides a straightforward recitation but as a nearly omniscient narrator, observing but not participating in what he narrates; and still other times he leaves the primary narrative altogether as he presents bizarre images and tells hallucinatory tales.

We get one indication that there is method to Bromden’s madness, so to speak, or a pattern to his narration, when he remarks on his Native American ancestry. Because his reticence caused whites to believe he was deaf and mute—“it was people that first started acting like I was too dumb to hear or see anything at all” (178)—Bromden pretends to be so, a sad irony that a descendant of an oral tradition would choose silence as a survival technique (Ware 97). Yet this technique serves Bromden well when he is institutionalized: he literalizes the situation and makes society believe that he actually is unable to speak or hear. Given that patients were treated as children and the establishment treatment of Indians was often highly patronizing, this response can be seen as quite rational. Bromden fakes his condition for his benefit, in full recognition of his power. “I’m cagey enough to fool them that much,” he asserts. “If my being half Indian ever helped me in any way in this dirty life, it helped me being cagey, helped me all these years” (4). He understands the paradox that “I had to keep on acting deaf if I wanted to hear at all”

(179). He attains control over his environment and his story through self-reliance on his ethnic traits and through a trickster-like inversion of the internalized self-hatred he experienced as a child when no one wanted to hear what he had to say.

While most readers attribute Bromden's cagey acts and multiple points of view to the paranoid actions and ramblings of a schizophrenic, seen in another way his willed distance from events and multiple methods of narration can be appreciated as a highly perceptive analysis of the disorientation characteristic of institutional life. In addition, Bromden's observations can be viewed as the imaginative reflections of an Indian raised with a mythic worldview. The hard, cold facts of logical discourse cannot get to the deep, pre-rational places where the Chief's worldview was shaped. The basic function of myth in societies like the Chinook's is to signal the voice of the sacred in the world. By "narrating the sacred," myth becomes the paradigm for a culture and how it functions (Eliade 97-98).

Thus, in describing how the mental hospital works, Bromden reaches for mythic language. Separated from the natural world, his operative allegory for reality is aptly mechanical. His relationship to what he calls "The Combine"—an entity that unifies individuals to further its own corporate interests and a machine that threshes, cuts, and cleans whatever is in its path—is a compelling metaphor for the systemic forms of control that shape the social order of the hospital and the world outside, all of which separate Bromden from the natural order of his ancestral heritage. Related to The Combine is the fog which also has its roots in Bromden's past experience: the military fogging of overseas airfields, the purpose of which was to mask secret activity or to obscure a target. This experience has given him the mechanical model of "an ordinary compressor," the sound of which he now associates with an impending sense of dislocation: "I heard the compressor start pumping in the grill a few minutes back . . . and already the mist is oozing across the floor so thick my pants legs are wet" (103).

Bromden spent a year studying electronics at college and then joined the army as an electrician's assistant during World War II. Thus, while he is very familiar with electronic and mechanical objects, he is also afraid of machines because he associates them with the war and in particular the air raid in Germany that, in part, precipitated his current mental problems. The Combine embodies the threat of extinction and of the reduction of human beings to machines, just as Bromden is a victim of the dominant culture that sent him to war and destroyed his tribal home: his vision has been formed by dislocating wounds of the past that run so deep they have left history and entered mythology. Yet as a means of entering into the pre-

logical realm, his hallucinatory perspective is also a means of retrieval of his sacred past and eventually of his identity.

From the very beginning of the novel, Bromden's narration is not like a typical linear narrative; rather, it convincingly creates a sense of his, and by extension of Kesey's, mythological imagination. Thus if Bromden is a sort of trickster in his style of storytelling then, back behind him, so his Kesey. The trickster is a prevalent figure in Indian myth and culture that is noted for its/his/her uncanniness and unaccountability, for subverting all sense of hierarchy and expectation. Here we see the trickster disrupting the expectation of a conventional narrative account. Kesey's narrative subversion extends to his own "recollections" when he develops a mythology about the origins of his alter-ego narrator.

At first Kesey attributed to the influence of drugs the notion of using Chief Bromden to narrate the novel: "I was flying on peyote, really strung out there, when this Indian came to me. I knew nothing about Indians, had no Indians on my mind, had nothing that an Indian could even grab onto, yet this Indian came to me. It was the peyote, then, couldn't be anything else. The Indian came straight out of the drug" (Leeds 21). Later in 1973, he offers in *Kesey's Garage Sale*, an alternate origin for Bromden. He attributes Bromden's appearance to a mystical event and in the process reverses the conventional order of reality. He goes so far as to separate Bromden from himself as a separate entity while also, by extension, identifying himself as the imaginative creation of Tom Wolfe. And he claims that writing the novel was a task initiated by Bromden to wake up the dominant culture to its own suppression of difference. Although long, his mythic memory is worth quoting in full:

Peyote, I used to claim, inspired my Chief narrator, because it was after choking down eight of the little cactus plants that I wrote the first three pages. These pages remained almost completely unchanged through numerous rewrites the book went through, and from this first spring I drew all the passion and perception the narrator spoke with during the ten month's writing that followed. That the narrator happened to be an Indian, despite my having never known an Indian before, I attributed to the well-known association between peyote and certain tribes of our southwest: "The drug's reputation is bound to make one think of our red brothers," was how I used to explain it to admiring fans. Now I don't think so. After years of getting off behind being prognosticator of what seemed to me a stroke of genius, if not a

masterstroke, I was notified that a certain spirit was getting a little peeved at the telegraph operator for being so presumptuous as to take credit for messages coming in, as though the receiver were sending the signal. “Mr. Bromden advises you to cease speaking as his creator,” I was notified; “Cease, or risk becoming prey to your own vain folly.” “Like how do you mean?” I wanted to know. “Being a genius is not something one gives up at the first idle threat” “If you keep thinking the Indian was your creation won’t you eventually be forced to think of yourself as Tom Wolfe’s creation?” That was a point, I had to admit, but I still wasn’t ready to relinquish a claim I was so fond of making, not just on the say-so of some nebulous notification. “I’ll believe it when I hear it from the horse’s mouth.” As if I expected the big Indian to come to me in a dream, splendid and spectral in beads and buckskins, and proclaim: “*I . . . am the entity that spoke through your words. It was my task to acquaint your people with this particular transgression upon the human soul. You availed yourself of the transmission. If you need something of which to be proud, be proud of this availability.*” (14-15, italics mine)

The careful placement of “as if,” buys Kesey some credibility. Later Kesey changes his claim to Native American knowledge. Initially he states that at the time of composition, he had little personal knowledge of Native American culture. But by 1994 in an interview for the *Paris Review*, Kesey reveals details of his experience with Indian culture that he obviously used in building a back story for Chief Bromden:

My father used to take me to the Pendleton Roundup in northern Oregon. He would leave me there for a couple of days. I spent time hanging around the Indians living in the area. I used to take the bus back down through the Columbia River Gorge where they were putting in The Dalles Dam to provide electricity to that part of Oregon so the fields could be irrigated. But it was also going to flood the Celilo Falls, an ancient fishing ground along the Columbia. The government was using scaffolding to build the dam. When I first came to Oregon, I’d see Indians out on the scaffolds with long tridents stabbing salmon trying to get up the falls. The government

had bought out their village, moved them across the road where they built new shacks for them. (Faggen)

Hence we might say that Kesey's novel pioneers a way of establishing a spiritual first contact with indigenous peoples and re-imagines the other as a way to help him feel at home in his own time. Kesey's deliberate ambiguity about how the novel came to be positions him as an American of European descent in perhaps the only authentic position he can take, somewhere between the etic and the emic, two perspectives that can be employed in the study of a society's cultural system.

The emic point of view as an epistemological concept focuses on the intrinsic cultural distinctions that are meaningful to the members of a given society. It is an interpretative position that posits native members of a culture as the sole judges of the validity of a description. The etic perspective, however, relies upon the extrinsic concepts and categories that have meaning for external observers. Lacking the access of the ethnic insider, the etic observer uses his imagination to cross over social and existential barriers and to identify as deeply as he can with the worldview he is trying to understand.

Kesey trusts an Indian narrator to tell his story because Chief Bromden can provide both an emic and an etic perspective. He is privy to two cultural systems: the native world of his upbringing, from which he has been disassociated, and the learned or acquired world of the mental hospital that he observes in silence and without commentary. In this way Kesey poses a fictional challenge to the discursive world of reality, setting forth the belief that objective knowledge is an illusion and that all claims to knowledge are ultimately subjective. Adopting a narrative strategy that allows him to be both an insider and an outsider, Kesey forces us to consider the nature of knowledge rather than the manner in which it is obtained. And the knowledge to which he introduces us is the worldview of Chief Bromden. In turn, the reader's growing consciousness of an indigenous way of interpreting reality validates this knowledge and builds consensus. The Chief aptly sums up the mythological imagination he adopts in telling his story and illustrates Kesey's principle of composition when he states: "It's the truth, even if it didn't happen" (8).

Questions of veracity take on a special intensity when applied to the experiences of mental patients, and a native perspective is also salient with regard to "truth" or "realism" as well in the biographical and social contexts of Kesey's writing. Around the time that Kesey was writing *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Michel Foucault broke the fourth wall of the socio-political drama enacted in the mental asylums that separate the sane from the insane. His social commentary

advanced the modern concept of madness as a cultural invention of those in power who need to maintain social control. It may have been the *Zeitgeist* of this time that contributed to Foucault's publishing, in French in 1961, *The History of Madness* (translated into English in 1967 as *Madness and Civilization*), one of his various illustrations of the insurrection of subjugated knowledge. Foucault's analysis is in some ways the discursive counterpart of Kesey's novel, for both shine a light on practices in mental hospitals.

While he was a graduate student at Stanford, Kesey was an employee at the Menlo Park Veterans Hospital, working the graveyard shift and participating in government-sponsored drug experiments. In the mental hospital as Kesey experienced it, therapy was a process of internalizing the moral codes of society. Kesey became sympathetic to the patients and began to question the boundaries created between sane and insane, and to wonder whether madness meant the common practice of conforming to a mindless system or the attempt to escape from such a system altogether. The coincidental appearance of his and Foucault's texts adds to the mythology established by Kesey's own creative etiology and life experience.

Furthermore, Foucault shares with Kesey and many indigenous philosophers a passionate avoidance of totalizing forms of analysis. In *Madness and Civilization* he indicts the modern European consciousness with its totalizing tendency and rejects psychiatry's connections with progress. As Kesey did in his fiction, Foucault dismisses the received wisdom that takes mad people from our midst and consigns them to the new world of the asylum; he shows them to be not quite so "mad" after all. This "gigantic moral imprisonment" (46)—the displacement of the insane—described by Foucault has obvious parallels in the colonial contact of Europeans with Native Americans, thereby further legitimizing Kesey's choice of an indigenous narrator.³

Bromden describes the treatment he and the other patients receive in the following way: "I've heard the theory of the Therapeutic Community enough times to repeat it forwards and backwards—how a guy has to learn to get along in a group before he'll be able to function in a normal society; how the group can help the guy by showing him where he's out of place; how society is what decides who's sane and who isn't, so you got to measure up. All that stuff" (44). This conformity to society's standards is insured by the operation of The Combine, the force that

³ His ideas supported the work of Erving Goffman, the American sociologist who equated the mental hospital and the concentration camp.

creates a mechanized, totalized, depersonalized society that sustains the conformity of the therapeutic treatment he observes.

The mental hospital in which Bromden has lived for the past twenty years plays a crucial role, therefore, in The Combine's control over the world. The ward is a factory for The Combine. "It's for fixing up mistakes made in the neighborhoods and in the schools and in the churches, the hospital is. When a completed product goes back into society, all fixed up and good as new, better than new sometimes, it brings joy to the Big Nurse's heart; something that came in all twisted different is now a functioning, adjusted component, a credit to the whole outfit and a marvel to behold" (36). Bromden further relates how the medical staff practices the insertion into the patient's brain of "head installations" (18) or "controls" (45) that produce a dull machine-generated conformity. Once discharged, a fully adjusted patient turns into a model worker and citizen, but Bromden dismisses what, for the hospital, is a "success" as "just another robot for The Combine" (19). Life in the mental ward, therefore, is a microcosm of that in the outer world.

The discipline and punishment and therapeutic community prescribed for those with mental illness, described by Kesey as techniques for rehabilitating his characters, take on a particular poignancy when applied to Chief Bromden. Rather than the resources of nature and the support of the tribe, Bromden faces the intervention of pharmaceutical and mechanical remedies, and confinement to a therapeutic community led not by a proud warrior like his father but by Nurse Ratched. Bromden is dispossessed, along with the rest of his tribe, because The Combine has long since bought up all the Indian territory. But the memory of this vanished world is still available to him through acts of memory and imagination: "I still hear the sound of the falls. . . ." (71).

Memory, therefore, is related to the mythological imagination. Into this scenario where the definitions of insanity and sanity are challenged enters Vine Deloria, who comments on schizophrenia—the condition ascribed to Chief Bromden—and establishes a case for the Indian's sanity. An inability to function in the modern world is, she says, a sane response to "the meaninglessness and alienation discernible in our generation," a partial result of abandoning Indian ways of being and structuring reality by "allowing time to consume space" (*Is God Red* 86). Subsequently, Deloria observes that "white society is always schizophrenic." As an example he cites "administrators who fight all that Indian stuff because Indians are not doing things the white way. Then you go up three economic levels

and find affluent people paying 500 bucks a weekend to go and have a sweat lodge so they can straighten out their psyches” (*Progressive* 26).

Just as Kesey spent time working in a mental hospital and took seriously the abuses he witnessed there, so do Deloria’s ironic observations extend to the practical, describing the kinds of circumstances that could have led to Chief Bromden’s committal, since even the meager health services established by the government for the Indians are exploited by whites. Deloria cites a conversation with an Indian Health worker who confessed that he had his own terrible psychological problems and “got into Indian Health Service with the idea that he would find Indian medicine men and they would help him solve his problems.” Extending his observation, Deloria exclaims: “These people have been crazy from the very beginning. These are the same guys that landed here and ran all over looking for the fountain of youth! Go back to your reservation, find your local medicine man, learn to do some ceremonies, and cure yourselves! In the process, these guys are going to follow you back there to be cured, because they realize the only sane way of living is the Indian ceremonial way” (27).

As Deloria’s comments illustrate, there is a logical connection between the kinds of moral imprisonment represented by psychiatric hospitals and Indian reservations. This connection, however is complicated by the fact that there is a two-edged sword being wielded whereby the schizophrenia elicited from Bromden is an entirely plausible response to all he, and by extension native peoples, have experienced. Likewise the insanity attributed to Bromden by the dominant culture is also a convenient way to displace the kind of interrogation that would reveal the weak moral and psychic health of those who would institutionalize him. Into this quagmire enters Kesey who uses a literary sleight of hand to disarm those who would control the narrative and returns to storytelling to its original voice.

While the academic discourse hardly presents an antagonistic relationship between cowboy and Indian, the critical commentary on *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* has ranged from the psychological and religious—McMurphy being described as the Grail Knight and a Christ figure, a kind of disruptive redeemer who loses his life in the process of saving others—to critical discourses that challenge what some view as the novel’s racism and sexism, inasmuch as the Big Nurse and her black assistants embody the evil forces of a repressive hospital and society.

However, out of over two dozen scholarly, independent sources that I have consulted, few come close to what I would identify as a reading of the novel through the eyes of First Americans. Only one stands out. In “The Indians America Loves to Love and Read: American Indian Identity and Cultural Appropriation,”

Kate Shanely correctly observes that “Indian people who have known the legacy of America’s racist history will develop a double-consciousness to preserve their right to be Indian. Ken Kesey got that part right in his creation of Mr. Bromden, the ‘schizophrenic’ Indian” (696). But Shanely only comments briefly on the novel as an illustration of her larger theme. The dominant theme in the other interpretations was decidedly European in its perspective, beginning with an assertion of the Chief’s profound schizophrenia and concluding with a triumphant approval of his individualistic achievement of liberation, credited to the character most identify as the true hero of the novel, McMurphy. Another common theme among critics emphasizes the Chief’s fundamental unreliability as a narrator. From among these sources, I’ve isolated examples of how some critics approach but do not think through the implications of a Native American narrator, still making Bromden’s thoughts and actions to some degree derivative of McMurphy’s.

These examples include the work of Barry H. Leeds who, like many critics, focuses on the salvation of Chief Bromden which Leeds links to Bromden’s assumption of McMurphy’s rebel role. Although he cites the Chief as a tangible representation of human alienation (17), Leeds does not link this alienation with the destruction of Indian nations and casts Bromden’s redemption solely as the product of the actions of a white man. Stephen L. Tanner reads the novel as advocating resistance against authority, and takes Bromden’s narration as an illustration of the novel’s theme of rescue or salvation. Bromden’s inner condition gives the reader a clear idea of what patients need rescue from, but Tanner does not link the need for rescue to the historical abuse of America’s First Persons. He even employs a rather awkward analogy when he describes Bromden’s image of McMurphy as “a giant, a god . . . he’s every movie show cowboy that ever walked down a Main Street toward the OK corral” (23).⁴

In “Parables of Costly Grace,” George Boyd attempts to isolate the spiritual dimensions of the novel but does so without making use of the practices of American Indians; instead he applies a Christian paradigm. He cites *One Flew Over*

⁴ John Zubizaretta also writes of the significance of the narrative point of view but cites its gaps and disparities as evidence of Bromden’s fundamental unreliability, the “unstable perspective of a paranoid schizophrenic through whose tenuous disturbed reflections we judge the actions of significance of the novel” (3). He appreciates the ways the “grotesque and weird” perceptions propel readers “into a phantasmagoric world of drug-induced visions” and attributes it to “the repressed past of an emasculated Indian father, a treacherous white mother, and a humiliated native people.” Furthermore, although he does not invoke the language of myth and accepts Bromden’s insanity, Zubizaretta sees the Chief as the novel’s hero, one whose subversive irony and unreliability as narrator testify to the power of the imagination, even if that imagination is lost “in an outer loony bin of chronic crazies or in an inner funhouse of schizophrenic madness” (7).

the Cuckoo's Nest as “the preeminent literary paradigm of redemption secularly conceived” (162). By labeling the novel as “secular” Boyd ignores the indigenous point of view, a myopia that extends to his understanding of redemption as something strictly Christian. His analysis elevates McMurphy to the level of Christ figure or redeemer while reducing the Chief to a figure in need of saving, as the one McMurphy “restored to human communication.” He further relegates Chief Bromden to a supporting role in Kesey’s “gospel” as the one performing a “mercy killing” necessary for the “resurrection experience.” Boyd’s language and biblical allusions marginalize the Chief as the evangelist who is compelled to follow McMurphy and whose transcendence comes only by way of self-sacrifice, while serving as a model for others to take up their own crosses (171). As decades of liberation theology have made clear, however, preaching the virtue of sacrifice and the nobility of suffering is a distorted way of promoting a life of faith among oppressed peoples, for whom this kind of activity is already a way of life rather than a special exercise.⁵

Janet Larson also takes a Christian perspective that acknowledges the power of myth but never equates this myth with an Indian worldview. To the contrary, she describes Bromden’s Indian perspective as a “‘primitive’ religious imagination” and suggests that the “power of opposing mythic terms must be diminished if the narrator is to get well” (31). By this she means that Chief Bromden must disabuse himself of the metaphor of *The Combine*. While recognizing the power of Bromden’s imagination, then, Larson sees Bromden’s use of it as being in opposition to his own mental health, and tries to demonstrate that only if he abandons his mythological thinking, his “legendary life outside the contingencies of human time,” will he be capable of rejoining society.⁶

⁵ Bruce Carnes also sees a sacrifice paradigm in the novel, and although he invokes non-Christian allusions, he sees the nursery rhyme of the title as being typical of rhymes “often used by primitive tribes to select the human sacrifice offered to appease a wrathful god” (15). Yet this observation does not necessarily dignify an indigenous point of view.

⁶ Patrick Shaw moves closer to a recognition of Indian values by identifying the West as “satiric territory” on account of its myth of the frontier and its legendary heroes. Shaw believes this substantiates Kesey’s advocacy in the novel of “individual freedom and collective egalitarianism” (1). Although he does not use the language of myth, Fred Madden distinguishes himself by recognizing the thematic value of Chief Bromden’s tale from a narrative point of view. He observes that the narrator’s “insanity and humanity cause him to distort facts in ways that disclose Kesey’s preoccupation with people’s dehumanization of themselves and others.” He also emphasizes the influence of the past and credits the Chief with rejecting both the limited options available to Indians as rug weavers or alcoholics and the dominant culture’s definitions of him “as Injun or Wildman” (8).

Robert Waxler explores more deeply the Indian ancestry of Bromden and equates his mixed heritage with schizophrenia. He sees Bromden's "half breed" status as being the root of his mental illness and also the model for his confused and incomplete narrative vision. Waxler's sensitivity to the Indian context of Bromden's thinking and imagination, however, gets lost when he advances as the central issue in the novel a "problem of manhood" (3). He identifies Chief Bromden as a classic example of a Freudian psychosis: an Oedipal interruption that interferes with recovering the roots of his native identity. Here Waxler imposes a European psychotherapeutic model on a Native American, and furthermore offers as an example of the achievement of manhood, not the communal vision of identity integral to Indian life but the American model of individualism. To his credit, though, he does see that this American or European model of the achievement of "male individual identity and phallogocentric control" (5) is, ironically, an alternate myth, one that contributed to the destruction of Native American ways of life.

Elaine Ware comes closest to an indigenous point of view when she describes, using Kesey's language, the importance of the "Vanishing American" (*Cuckoo's Nest* 62). Providing information derived from careful research, she takes seriously the novel's historical context when she claims that the circumstances that led to Bromden's hospitalization—a weak self concept—are a direct result of "growing up in a sub-culture that is in its final stage of socio-cultural disintegration" (98). Being torn between his desire to maintain his Indian heritage and the necessity of developing behavior acceptable to the dominant white culture makes Bromden schizophrenic, Ware claims; furthermore, she suggests that what has been done to Indians on the social level is being played out in the Chief's schizophrenia. While my own interpretation and application of Deloria's insights support Ware's claims, what she does not do is extend the argument to its concluding paradox that dignifies the very conditions she finds worthy of our compassion by attributing agency to Chief Bromden.

Elena Semino and Kate Swindlehurst's linguistic analysis of Bromden's narrative centers on its figurative diction which, they argue, expresses or reveals a particular way of perceiving and making sense of the world. In observing how Bromden's narrative projects a distinctive and idiosyncratic thinking style, they focus on Bromden's "consistent use of similes and metaphors involving underlying conceptual metaphors in which almost everything (society, the hospital, the therapists, the inmates, and Bromden himself) is a machine" (6).

Although these two critics cite the extended use of machine metaphors as an indication of mental instability and even as a source of delusion and obsession, they

also recognize that this is a useful way of thinking and talking about the world. But from an indigenous point of view we can go further and claim that this kind of imaginative transference, this creative use of language, is entirely consistent with a mythic approach, where an unintelligible reality is rendered in familiar terms as a way of making sense of and describing the world. The machine metaphors take the static temporal world of the mental hospital and transform it into a spatial world of activity, of place and memory and history.

Kesey remarks in the preface to his novel that “You get your visions through whatever gate you’re granted” (*Cuckoo’s Nest* vii). One open gate onto this novel as a place of indigenous memory and history is provided by the work of a Kiowa writer, N. Scott Momaday, and by the narrative logic behind *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. Momaday’s text can help us to read Chief Bromden’s narrative from the narrator’s multiple points of view, but without the presumption of psychosis. Indeed, by rendering his tale as myth, memoir, and history, Bromden performs a supremely sane act. The motive behind his telling of his story is unclear, but we can surmise from the example of Momaday that an inquiry into the past is necessary in order to determine the extent to which one has become detached from the worldview of one’s ancestors; and, in undertaking such a journey, it is also essential to find one’s way back. For although the cultural identity of a traditional Indian was given and irrevocable, contemporary Native Americans living in our mass society can only maintain their identity as Indians by a forceful act of will in the face of pressure and hostility, both from within and without the Indian world. They must create—or find—their own therapeutic “community.”

Momaday has written that “We are what we imagine. Our very existence consists in our imagination of ourselves” (“Native American” 80). And he has demonstrated this principle in the creation of *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. He developed this book from a collection of Kiowa tales and blended these stories with anthropological material and personal reminiscences, all of which combine to reflect the crystallization of Momaday’s Kiowa identity. Structurally the text is composed of 24 triads written in three distinct voices, visually presented in different fonts. The associations between these three voices—the legendary or mythic voice, the historical or anthropological voice, the personal or autobiographical voice—lead to a fusion of these different views of reality in the author’s imagination. That is, here they become a unified whole, the core of Momaday’s understanding of himself. This structure allows the author to reveal how his cultural identity is interconnected and how it is detached, what shaped this identity and what is missing from it.

When we apply the same method of ordering reality to Chief Bromden's narrative—for the moment suspending our disbelief and accepting at Kesey's word the reality of Bromden, independent of the author's consciousness—then the confusing elements of the text begin to make sense. The period in which Kesey wrote can also support the intentional act of reconstruction implied by Momaday's approach. After all, the American counterculture of the 1960s insisted on a willful confrontation with and subversion of many aspects of the status quo, including the status of Native Americans.

Kesey's autobiography, in setting forth a mystical etiology for the novel and situating the Native American narrator as the true "author" of the text, is echoed in Momaday's paradoxical diminishment of his own character in the honoring of his ancestors. The mental health fallacies Foucault, Kesey, and Deloria exposed in their writings parallel Momaday's exposure of the sad state of contemporary Indian life. And the disparate voices of detached critical commentary on *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* bear witness to the fractured condition of historical record and the need to join in a collective approach to interpreting reality as set forth by Momaday in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*.

For Bromden as for Momaday, the act of will that sustains one's identity is realized in an act of imagination. The resulting text, therefore, grows out of a personal and historical need for self-definition by way of liberation from all that held one apart from tribal attachment. Of course, actual freedom from the confines of the mainstream society's "mental hospital" does not insure spiritual freedom; rather, Bromden will not be free until he returns to his own world to tell his story and the story of others in his own voice, indeed, until he re-acquires his voice. And his story is not his alone. He must cast his story in traditional ways using mythic techniques and visions if he is going to defeat The Combine.⁷

Bromden's historical account of life at the mental hospital is divided into three periods: Mac's battle with Big Nurse, which ends with the "television uprising"; the shattering of the glass window at the nurses' station which leads to electroshock therapy for the Chief and Mac; and the party, Mac's failure to escape due to his wish to save Billy, his lobotomy, death, and Bromden's escape. Momaday's text is also structured into 3 phases: *The Setting Out*, where it is revealed that words have a sacred power and constitute the origin of all things; *The Going On*, where language continues to serve the Indian peoples; and *The Closing*

⁷ A curious repetition of threes occurs when Bromden is arguing internally. He follows the sequence he has learned through speaking with another persona: three times making a statement, questioning it, correcting it, and affirming a restatement.

In, where language becomes powerless to halt the steady decline of Kiowa culture. As the Kiowas emerge from myth and legend into history, so do words lose their metaphorical power and lapse into the mere function of denotation, thus heralding the decline of their culture.

What offers hope for Momaday is adopted by Bromden via his mythic imagination and within his own historical and political context. He reflects on his childhood, seeing the land as a crucial part of his personal identity formation. He exercises the power of imagination to create meaning and to extend his sense of place into a decisive moral act. In his developing relationship with McMurphy he affirms the necessity of personal relations across cultures. And by telling his story he demonstrates a reverence for the power of language to effect transformation and affirms the critical need for self-knowledge.

The historical voice in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* comes through in Kesey/Bromden's literal and detached recitation of events, events that Kesey offers by way of a critique of the mainstream white society's handling of mental illness; this piecemeal and fragmented history also illustrates the lack of social cohesion in the society. Bromden's predicament is illustrative of his entire tribe, and perhaps of much of Indian life in the U.S. at that time. Bromden's childhood would have been in the 1920s and 1930s, when the U.S. government was struggling to decide whether Indians should maintain their tribal customs or adopt white culture, after the obvious failure of the Dawes Act (1887) to achieve integration of the Native Americans into white American culture. By this point many Indians, like Bromden's tribe, had sold their land and lost their social cohesion and old way of life. By 1934 the government realized the extent of the Indians' poverty and passed the Indian Reorganization Act (Wheeler-Howard Act) which, rather than attempting assimilation, tried to reestablish a tribal government and sustain the disappearing culture by encouraging the study of Indian history and art. Lands were returned to tribal, not individual ownership (Ware 95-96).

In the context of this Indian history we get Chief Bromden's personal story in remembered fragments, an existential and narrative dislocation mirrored in the absence of any Indian name. In Chinook tradition "names are hereditary" and "the name assumes a personality; it is the shadow or spirit or other self . . . between the name and the individual there is a mysterious connection" (Bancroft 245). Bromden remembers his father by his given name, Tee Ah Millatoona—The Pine that Stands Tallest on the Mountain (246). Physically and psychologically his father lived up to his name and as a child Bromden modeled himself after his father. He relates for the reader an idyllic memory of Indian life; the father is teaching the child to hunt, to

find and eat bugs in case of hunger, and to fish: “The sound of the falls on the Columbia . . . the woop of Carley Bear Belly stabbed himself a big Chinook . . . the slap of fish in the water, laughing naked kids on the bank, the women at the racks” (71).

This world is a paradise until the government decides to build a dam. Bromden’s father resists negotiations but is assaulted, his hair gets cut, and he eventually sells his land, defeated by the government. After that, Bromden tells us, “when I saw my Papa start getting scared of things, I got scared too” (146). Another complication is his white mother; she gives him her surname, thereby relinquishing their and his tradition because she has adopted the dominant culture’s opinion of itself: “We ain’t Indians. We’re civilized and you remember it” (239). Bromden’s self-concept becomes based on white people’s perception of him, the same people “who don’t care what tribe he is” (183). Although Chinooks were once proud of their physical appearance, especially of their custom of flattening the head which signified a high status (Bancroft 227), Bromden sees himself as being unattractive, the way white people saw him when they taunted him: “Look how overdone little Hiawatha is . . . Burnt to a fair turn” (170).

An especially poignant memory for Bromden concerns his grandmother, just as Momaday’s grandmother plays an important role in his own reflections. Her body is desecrated when government regulations require her family to follow white burial practices. But after this capitulation, Bromden, his father and his uncles “lay rolled in blankets Grandma had woven, Papa tells me lying off a piece from where the men hunkered around the fire as they passed a quart jar of cactus liquor in a silent circle. I watched that big Oregon prairie moon above me put all the stars around me to shame” (142). These and other elegant reflections on his past reinforce for Bromden another self-image: he “used to be real brave around water,” when as “a kid on the Columbia, I’d walk the scaffolding around the falls with all the other men, scrambling around with water roaring green and white all around me and the mist making rainbows, without even any hobnails like the men wore” (132).

This is the period of Bromden’s life that precedes the traumas, humiliations, and loss of confidence that gave rise to his mechanistic view of the world. The contrast between his representations of the past and of the present could not be more striking. On one side there are nature and strong personal ties, on the other technology and alienation. The recent history that helped initiate this flood of memories is revealed in his account of Mac’s arrival.

In making Bromden his narrator, Kesey not only provides a voice with which to tell the events that transpired on the mental ward and by implication in the

surrounding society; he also provides a point of view from which to judge the events narrated. Still, this “personal history” is incomplete without the mythic voice. At one point in the text Bromden addresses the reader to explain how his life has been shaped by forces that can only be described in mythic terms. “I know already what will happen: somebody’ll drag me out of the fog and we’ll be back on the ward and there won’t be a sign of what went on tonight and if I was fool enough to try and tell anybody about it they’d say, Idiot, you just had a nightmare; things as crazy as a big machine room down in the bowels of a dam where people get cut up by robot workers don’t exist. But if they don’t exist, how can a man see them?” (80).

Because of his Indian upbringing, Bromden believes the truth revealed by the (his) mythological imagination and can see because he believes. The reader also begins to intuit that even at their most abstract, Bromden’s machine images say something true about the world they portray, exposing the mechanization of contemporary society and the dehumanization of psychiatric patients. Bromden’s account of himself as a casualty of a mechanical world is in this sense perfectly accurate. The mythic machine provides an accurate image of the worldview, that is, of the world in which Bromden has no free agency.

But when he rejects the mechanistic model of himself, when he relies on the resources of myth and memory, Bromden slowly acquires an awareness of his ability to change the world around him that culminates in his fight with the orderlies, his merciful killing of McMurphy, and his flight from the hospital with the hope that he can return to a world from which he has “been away a long time” (281), a world where myths are real for an Indian who has a specific history built around a people’s longevity, sense of place, and language.

The recovery of his ability to remember a life not dominated by his mechanistic worldview is a central part of Bromden’s development over the course of the novel. He explicitly expresses surprise and pleasure upon discovering that he is at last again able to linger on his childhood: “I was kind of amazed that I remembered that. It was the first time in what seemed to me centuries that I’d been able to remember much about my childhood. It fascinated me to discover that I could still do it. I lay in bed awake, remembering other happenings” (184). Toward the end of the novel, the resurgence of the past in Bromden’s mind becomes the manifestation of his victory over the system, the Combine; when after an electroshock treatment he realizes that for the first time he has deliberately avoided the long daze that had normally followed shock treatments, he triumphantly declares “[I] knew this time I had them beat” (249).

The novel's three voices, all spoken by the Chief, illustrate through a complex narrative range what it means to be a people, or for a person to be of that people. Kesey/Bromden's mythic, autobiographical, historical text comprises, in the words of Kate Shanley, "the cultural basis for the literature of cross-cultural conversation." Quoting Leslie Silko, Shanley further observes that one must have story because "that's how you know you belong" (697). Chief Bromden accomplishes what Kesey had strived to do as a novelist: he returns the world to pure story. In the process he finds a place to belong, and brings an order to bear on events in order to explain or reveal meanings, because he is able to hold in balance the fragmented voices of history, myth, and self.

One can also see being enacted by the residents of the mental ward the social drama Shakespeare anticipated in *The Tempest*. As noted by Victor Turner, the social dramas that emerge in liminal states arise out of abstract cultural domains or "fields" where paradigms are formulated, established, and come into conflict. But within these social dramas it is in specific "arenas" or concrete settings that abstract paradigms are transformed into symbolic metaphors by the actions of "lead actors"—in this case by McMurphy and Bromden. The liminality of episodes of conflict, therefore, is a "sacred" time in Turner's formulation, because what emerges out of this liminality is a "communitas or social antistructure" which is "often a sacred condition or can become one." "Structure is all that holds people apart, defines their differences, and contains their actions" whereas communitas reverses oppressive structural norms like race, class, gender, and sexual orientation (*Dramas* 47). In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, the patients create a communitas which, while temporary, does afford Chief Bromden the opportunity to escape into the possibility of a life where he can reaffirm the root paradigms of Indian belief, a "place" where sacred time is not transitory but permanent.

Chief Bromden may still be what Kate Shanley describes as an "Indian Americans love to read," but he can help us to read the Indians within American culture with a certain subtlety of mind, a clarity of purpose, and a willingness to hear "the silence of heard stories in translations" (697). There may be better examples of how to do this, but I'll let Kesey have the last word in order to describe my attempt to read with indigenous eyes: "You work from the heart out, you don't work from the issue down. . . . You can't do it any other way" (*Garage Sale* 205).

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