Poetics and Politics

N. SCOTT MOMADAY

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Larry Evers: He does not need an introduction, this is the man, so I'll pass on that formality and just say welcome, I'm happy to have you here with us. I talked a little bit with Scott about what we've been doing and how we've been using this hour and suggested that one of the things that we're very interested in is the current work and the work with drama as a form. I understand that you've recently been able to give a reading, supervise a reading of the new play, so maybe we could start by having you talk a little bit about that current work and go from there.

N. Scott Momaday: Let me start by telling you a little bit about my new play. I had wanted to write a play for many years and finally got round to it. I have a good friend who is a playwright, and so he's given me a lot of encouragement and taught me some things about the craft of writing a play. He wrote The Elephant Man. His name is Bernard Pomerantz. He also wrote a play called Melons, which is based upon Geronimo and Carlos Montezuma. I watched him make his way through that play. And then it was produced in London. The Royal Shakespeare produced it, and I went to see it. It was quite an exciting thing for me. And then it was produced at the Yale Drama School. And the woman who directed it there is an Austrian woman whose name is Geeta Hanager. She's very good, a very good director. She's very much interested in Native American material, so she was of course interested

in Bernard's play Melons. Then, she decided that she wanted to put together some kind of program in Native American drama. She got some money, which in these days, as you know, is very hard to do, but she managed. And, she commissioned me to write a play. So I did, and it was given a reading, a staged reading, at Harvard the first week in February. That was a very exciting experience for me. I had acted in a couple of college plays, a hundred years ago. It was a thoroughly enjoyable experience. I had an inkling of what it was like to put a play together on stage, to block it, and to rehearse it and so on. So I went there as the playwright to see the reading. The reading is really for the benefit of the playwright, because hearing it read on stage by professional actors generally is very helpful to you in terms of the revision. And so I went there just very excited and expecting to learn a great deal. The night I got there, Geeta and Jeff Hanley, who is the head of Native American Studies at Harvard, met me and we went to dinner in Boston. Somewhere in the course of the dinner conversation, Geeta said, "How would you like to play the part of Emdota?" It's one of the parts in the play. There are only six characters, Emdota is one of them. She had trouble with the man who was originally cast in that role. He started giving her trouble at the last minute. He couldn't make the plane to Harvard in the nick of time and he would have to miss the

first day of rehearsals. Then I think he wanted some more money, you know, that sort of thing. So she decided that I should play the part. This came as a complete surprise, but I did that. And that was even more exciting to me. So not only did I get to hear the play, but I got to act in it.

Let me tell you about the play. It is a full length play in two acts, entitled The Indolent Boys. It is based upon an incident which took place in a boarding school in 1891, a Kiowa boarding school at Anadarco, Oklahoma. It was Oklahoma Territory at the time. Three boys--one of whom had been disciplined, had been whipped--three boys ran away in January of 1891. They were trying to make their way to the camps, to their families, a distance of forty miles away. And as they were traveling on foot across the country, they were overtaken by a storm and they froze to death. The Kiowas, when they discovered the bodies, were incensed, of course, grief stricken and angry. They marched upon the school, beat up the superintendent of the school who was completely innocent of the whole affair. The man who administered the whipping ran away. He hid in the rafters of the school for two or three days, and then he disappeared, never to be seen again.

It is an incident which is interesting because it is very much alive in the tribal memory. I grew up hearing about the frozen boys. The people tell the story. They

told it when I was a child. It's one of the pictographic entries in the Kiowa calendar. So, this fascinated me. I didn't know much about it, just what I had heard. When I started thinking about the play I would write, this incident came to mind. I wondered how much I could find out about it. And to my surprise there is quite a bit of data, quite a bit of research material on the play, which I obtained through the Oklahoma Historical Society and the National Archive. So I found out the names of the principles involved. I read the reports that the Superintendent of the school and the Indian agent at Anadarco made to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, and the letter which the disciplinarian wrote in his own defense. There's all that material. It was exciting to find it, and then use it in the play.

I learned a lot about writing a play in the process. It's different from writing a novel. Maybe the biggest difference is that you never finish a play. When you come to the last sentence of a novel you can put the period there and that's it. But a play goes on and on. In fact, I'm not sure that I haven't opened a box that I can't really deal with now. I thought, "Well, I've got the summer." I wrote the play last summer basically. I thought, "Yes, I've got the summer. I can do that and I'll have that out of the way." Hah! Not so. I'm still working on it, and revising

it. I keep seeing things. Having heard the actors especially at Harvard, I keep seeing things that I need to patch up, work on, extend, or omit. So, that's one of the things that has been of my immediate concern for the last year.

Then I'm doing other things as well. I wrote a book called _In the Presence of the Sun_. It is a collection of sixteen stories about Plains shields. Very short, like the things in _The Way to Rainy Mountain_, a page in length or less. Then I drew sixteen shields. So the book is composed of a preface, the sixteen stories, each accompanied by its own shield, the drawing of a shield. This was published by the Rydell Press in Santa Fe and came out in September. It's a fine press book, and so I think there were only a hundred and fifty copies of it printed. Some of the books have the drawings hand colored. I hand colored a set of the drawings, and then the publisher assigned a colorist to follow my example and color some of the editions. So it's a very handsome thing. It's very rare and very expensive. But St. Martin's Press is going to bring out my next book, which is also called _In the Presence of the Sun_, but it is an expanded edition. It will have the sixteen shields as a centerpiece, but it will also include poems, both selected and new, and drawings. I think there are fifty drawings altogether, and maybe seventy-five poems. So, I'm just

dealing with that, too. I'm just dealing with the manuscript. They've already copy-edited it. Now I'm placing the drawings in the text. I think I'm just about finished with that. That should be the last step except for the proofreading of the galleys. And then that book will be available.

So those are the things that I'm working on at present time. I have two chapters of books in the works; one dealing with sacred ground, and the other dealing with the evolution of Native American literature. Those things were due three months ago, you know. I don't think I've ever met a deadline in my life--maybe one. So I'm always behind. But, you know, that's okay with me. Sometimes it gets my publishers a little nervous.

Deirdre O'Malley: You mentioned that you're writing about the progress of Native American literature. So many of the guests we've had during this seminar have named you as the "father" of what they see as a Native American Renaissance. Does that put pressure on you? How do you relate to that?

N. Scott Momaday: Well, I don't really think about that a lot. I remember Joe Bruchac came one day and interviewed me. In the interview he referred to me as the "Dean" of Native American writers. And I said, "Please, no. Let's think of another title. I don't want to be a dean."

(Laughter.)

Yes, I don't know. I'm very gratified when people talk about my having something to do with the renaissance of Native American literature in the twentieth century. Ah, but I take that with a grain of salt. I don't know that that's true. I do think that House Made of Dawn was published at a very opportune time in the history of Native American literature. Dee Brown's Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee came out at just about the same time, and both of those books were extremely well received. I think that the publishing world saw something in the future of Native American literature that it had not seen before. So it was good timing, but you know that's about as much as I can say.

Deirdre O'Malley: There is a quote that I think relates to that from The Ancient Child. It is about how Locke Setman at thirty had received such a reputation. It says, "He was among the first rank of American artists, and he was in danger of losing his soul." I was wondering how that related to you. Do you feel a relationship between yourself and that character?

N. Scott Momaday: Oh, yes. I also was thinking not so much about myself as about other prominent artists. I was thinking of Fritz [Scholder] when I was writing that statement, and R.C. Gorman and other people. I think that's a danger that Native American artists run. They can easily get locked in. It's hard to be original if you're a very

prominent artist. People keep demanding a certain kind of expression from you. That is what they will buy. There comes a time in the process of success when the artist has a terrible time. There is such a polarization between profit and creativity. Many times the artist is made to do what he does not particularly want to do but he does it because it's expected of him, demanded of him. Great rewards are offered to him.

It's interesting that you should point to that passage because I read that last week in New York. It's the first time I had read it in public. I was talking to people afterwards about that, and they were asking just basically what you're asking. That is a dilemma for Set, you know. He's become very stale, and he feels that he is being manipulated, which certainly he is. And he rebels against that, or wants to, but doesn't know how. In a sense, that dilemma leads to other things in the novel, so it's a necessary kind of thing for him. But it's also a very frustrating and debilitating kind of thing.

N. Scott Momaday: Chad.

Chad Galts: I'd like to go back to what you were saying about art. Do you consider yourself a verbal artist or a graphic artist or both? And can you talk about what the relationship is between those?

N. Scott Momaday: I'm trying to be both. I have a deeper

investment in writing, because I've been at it a longer time. So, you know if you were to come up to me and say, "What sort of artist are you?" I would say, "Well, I'm a writer." But, the fact is that my father was a painter. I spent my childhood watching him, and I'm sure I learned something about painting by watching him. But I moved in the other direction. I didn't come to painting until I was in my forties. About fifteen years ago, I started seriously drawing. That led to painting and print-making. Now that's become a very important part of my life. I'm not as familiar with it as I am with writing. It would be a good thing if I could bring the two things into balance, because both are important to me. I find that both expressions of my spirit are valuable to me. But I think that I've been at writing for such a long time that I can do that almost automatically. Painting, though, I have a great deal to learn about that. So they're not quite in balance, but they're getting there.

Yes, Joni--hi!

Joni Clarke: Hi. In "The Man Made of Words" you say you were trying to show dramatically how the oral tradition can live within a literary continuance. Could you talk about that? Does The Ancient Child do that, show how the oral tradition can live within a literary continuance? And also, I'm curious about why Billy the Kid? I think that Grey's

chapbook shows how an oral tradition through the imagination can come to live within a literary continuance, but why Billy the Kid?

N. Scott Momaday: I think the oral tradition does inform The Ancient Child particularly. There are a lot of elements of oral tradition in it, of course. It's based upon a story that comes directly out of Kiowa oral tradition. The Billy the Kid stuff is largely oral tradition. So the first thing to say is that, yes, oral tradition informs that novel in a particular way and I was aware of that when I was writing. That's one of the things I had always in mind as I was working on it. It begins with Billy the Kid and that great American folk material about Billy the Kid. It deals with a man who is a reincarnation of the boy who turns into a bear, which is a central myth in Native American tradition. And it ends with the confrontation when Set returns to Tsoai, and the transformation, as it is strongly hinted in the last pages, takes place or begins to take place. So all of that is oral material.

Now Billy the Kid, Billy the Kid has been a fascination for me for most of my life. I grew up in New Mexico, and at one time I lived down in that Roswell area where Billy the Kid lived. I knew the Mescalero country as a child, and lived in Santa Fe, of course, where he had been on a couple of occasions. I was an only child and, as you may or may

not know, only children invent playmates. Billy the Kid was one of mine, maybe the principal playmate. So we rode the range together, he and I. I became so interested in him. It would be hard to catalogue those reasons for you now, here. I'm fascinated by the fact that this boy never did reach manhood. He is said to have been killed at the age of twenty-one. He may have been one or two years older than that. He was obviously not reluctant to shoot a man down in cold blood. He is said to have killed twenty-one men. This is all legend. These are not the facts by any means. He probably killed six or seven. But, who's going to quibble? He was public enemy number one. He was also a man of great generosity. He had friends who were willing to lay down their lives for him. They were extremely loyal to him. And he had fun. He enjoyed life. He loved to kiss the girls and make them cry. He liked to go to dances. He liked music. He liked to eat. He liked to demonstrate how large a bite he could take out of a whole pie, because he had buck teeth and he could apparently take an enormous bite. He liked to demonstrate that fact to people. And he died the young hero's death, shot down in a dark room by Pat Garret. The night he died, people in Fort Sumner were terribly upset. The women came, crying, weeping, and asked permission to take the body. And they did. They laid it out in a work shed, and with candles. They placed candles

all around it. And they held a wake which was extremely moving and deeply felt. They buried him the next morning.

He has since become one of the great legends in American folk literature. One of the great operas, as you know, was based upon his life. I think at last count there were forty-nine movies about Billy the Kid. Folk songs. And so, I am fascinated by how it is that a twenty-one year old boy can become that large a thing in the American imagination. And so, I have read, like Grey, almost everything that has been written about him. He is certainly my favorite dime novel Wild West figure. When I was reaching out for the dime novel aspect of The Ancient Child, Billy the Kid was right there. I couldn't have gone anywhere else really. So that's why, Joni, that he figures in the novel.

Linda, you're just about to raise your hand. I can see it poised.

Linda Bolton: Poised and ready to go. There's a sentence in The Ancient Child that picks up on what you're talking about here. You are talking about the American imagination, "The admixture of the violent and benign that seems so central to the American experience, and is so powerful in the American imagination." Could you speak about this, those two elements that you seem to see as central to the American imagination?

N. Scott Momaday: Yes, that's a very important question. One could talk all day about that, but to try to condense it, uhm. One goes back to the dime novel, I think, and the idea that the Wild West is indispensable to the American imagination. There is no such thing without the Wild West. The Wild West, you know, it begins somewhere back with the discovery of America. Scott Fitzgerald's last paragraph in which he talks about the green breast of the new world, and Dutch sailors looking west to something commensurate with their power of imagining. The dime novel is as I see it a direct reflection of that fascination. The Boston bank clerk who could go and buy a Ned Buntline novel and take it home and just be transported into a wilderness. That satisfied all his cravings. It's a wonderful thing, and then even more wonderful was the fact that, by God, it was there. People could go out on the Oregon Trail and find Indians, you know, in the grass. That's a terrible, exciting feature of America. It has appealed not only to Americans themselves, but to peoples around the world. I have a great friend in Finland, for example, who has tattooed on his arm "It's a good day to die" and who wears around his neck a pouch which holds pebbles from Wounded Knee Creek. He belongs to a club. They call themselves Findians. They dress in authentic Dakota costume at their meetings. That kind of thing is terribly powerful. One of

the things that characterizes this fascination with the West is violence.

Americans are a violence-loving people. We come by it naturally, because our history is full of violence. It's a sad thing in a way, but it is true. People in the Wild West lived a life predicated upon violence. And we, we perpetuate that violence in our daily lives. I read this terrible statistic the other day about how many deaths, on television, a child is subjected to in a year's time. It's an unbelievable number of violent deaths, killings. I have a friend in Switzerland who is very much interested in Native American literature. He gets mad about the violence. He says, "You Americans are concentrated upon violence." He read The Ancient Child and the rape scene, for example, and said, "Why do you do that? You don't have to do that." I said, "I don't have to do that, but it's true." It's true. It's true to the traditions of American literature. This is one of the ways in which we express the equation of the frontier in American history. It's not a pastoral. It's a murder mystery. So that's a short answer to your question, Linda, but it's very important.

Linda Bolton: May I just ask one more? The concept of an American imagination, I wonder when we use that phrase. There's certainly a fusion in terms of perspective, because no matter from what point of view, when one looks at the

history of the West, it is a violent history. But in our own mind, are you in any way re-writing that history as a Native American writer? Is there one American imagination that pulls us all together or are there different imaginative constructs of that history at work in your writing?

N. Scott Momaday: I think so. I think there is. I am trying to add another footnote to that history. People have been doing that right along. If you think about Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee, Dee Brown does take that thirty year period which was so crucial in the history of the Wild West. He gives us another view of it, one that we had not seen before. Arthur Kopit, in his play Indians, is up to the same thing. There's that wonderful passage in which Buffalo Bill is talking to Sitting Bull. They're just having a quiet conversation. What did they call it? Schmoozing? Buffalo Bill is so concerned to justify himself and the Wild West show, so he says, "But we had a good time, didn't we? We had a good time." And Sitting Bull says, "Oh yes, that was the bad thing because we were the Indians, we were unable to imitate our glory." We thought that was good. What lies directly behind what he's saying is this terrible tragedy, you know, because it is imitation. And Buffalo Bill in that play, which I think is a wonderful play, just crumbles, disintegrates under the weight of imitation,

grease paint. He's been so caught up in his own legend that he can't deal with it. So, yes, I think in my writing one of the things that I would like to do is to say, "Yes, this is all true, in its way. But here's another facet of the truth which maybe you haven't seen before." I can talk about the good things in the Indian world, you know, not necessarily the great historical moments, but the fact that they love their children, this old man would paint his face and pray the sun out of the ground. Those things are worth knowing about.

Vicki Broach: In that same passage that Linda quoted, Grey is speculating on the nature of Billy the Kid. At the end, she says, "How's that for the marriage of history and myth?" And then later on, she associates Perfecto with Billy the Kid. She says if Billy the Kid had lived to be thirty, he would be a man like Perfecto. And then it is Perfecto who makes this sort of ceremonial attack upon Set with the bear claw. It seems that attack is purgative for him in some ways. It is after that that Set can make a morning prayer. I think the words you use are, "in his utter-most humiliation, something of his will, will to power was unaccountably restored to him." So, that becomes cathartic for him. Am I fair in reading it that way?

N. Scott Momaday: Yes, certainly. That's true. Perfecto Atolly is playing a part in the healing process. It's pre-

ordained. Grey comes to him for that purpose, knowing that, as the keeper of a bear paw, he is in an unusual position to help Set in his quest. So she brings Set to him, intentionally. And the humiliation and so on is, you know, that she knows all about that and so does Perfecto. Set doesn't, but that's beside the point. He doesn't have to know. Billy the Kid, we don't know what he might have become. Grey says that. She indicates that had he lived long enough he might have been a man like Perfecto. And he may have, who knows? There were possibilities within his character. He could have become a healing man, too. I think that's what she would like to think of him.

Vicki Broach: I'm curious also about that scene. I was reminded strongly in reading it of a similar scene in House Made of Dawn when the Albino attacks Abel.

N. Scott Momaday: In the chicken pull.

Vicki Broach: Yes, with the chicken. Are those scenes similar in your mind?

N Scott Momaday: Mm, I hadn't really considered that. I know that on the surface there are similarities, but I don't think of the Albino's beating of Abel with the chicken as being affirmative, as being good for Abel. Whereas, what Perfecto does to Set is good for him. It's a part of the process, the healing process. But the Albino is acting out of malice, evil, as I see it. Good question, I hadn't

thought about that.

Jeanne Armstrong: I'd also like to go back to Linda's question and ask you to comment on the other side of that equation, the benign component. You had commented that the American imagination is both violent and benign. Could you say something about the other side of that, the benign side?

N. Scott Momaday: Sure.

Jeanne Armstrong: Do you see that as a paradoxical relationship?

N. Scott Momaday: Well, it is a paradox, but it's also an indispensable equation. I suppose most world histories are composed of such equations between the violent and the benign. Man is a maker of war, you know. That is simply a fact. We have fallen in love with making war. We do it and have done it expertly. But of course, as opposed to that, and as a means of giving us some way of measuring the effect of war as a moral equation, we have peace loving traditions. We are in many ways benign. We like to be comfortable. We like to be safe. We like to raise our children in safe circumstances. We like picnics. So, yes, one of the things that I think has not been sufficiently covered in histories of this country is the Indian love of peace and so on. We tend to see him according to the stereotypes as a violent human being. He makes war on other tribes and other peoples. He likes to eat raw meat. God, that's awful.

But, we need to know more about his investment in the benign. Certainly, that is there. I guess we're getting around to that. If you've seen, as I'm sure everyone in the world has by now, Dances with Wolves, you see both of those things in the Lakota people in the film. They are violent. They're buffalo hunters. They carry weapons. But they love each other. And they love their lives. And, if left alone, they would be among the happiest people on the face of the earth. Did you see Black Robe? Pretty violent, you know. Again, one side of Indian. I think the equation is in balance. There is the violent, there is the benign. We need to know more about how that balance is struck, how it works.

Dennis Selder: How does the Church figure into the equation of violence in the Wild West?

N. Scott Momaday: Well, that's a very large question. We think of Columbus coming to the new world, and he brings many things with him. And these things have a powerful, powerful effect upon the indigenous peoples. One of the things he brings is Christianity. I suppose if you look back upon the history of the world for the last 2,000 years, one of the most devastating forces has been Christianity. Religion is marked. It is a violent construct, you know, even the Southwest. The Catholic Church had been at Jemez for 400 years by the time I wrote House Made of Dawn. And,

you know, the presence of Christianity there has made such a difference. When the Spaniards first came to San Diego canyon, that was where the Jemez lived. It's a little north of the pueblo now. They came in with a cannon, you know. The Indians were up on top of the mesa. How do you convert Indians to Christianity? You shoot your cannon at them. And so they were terrified. Indians were terrified. They began jumping off the cliff, committing suicide. That's not a good beginning, you know. Then there was the Indian Rebellion in 1680. At Jemez Springs, there is an old church where a priest was shot at the altar saying mass, by Indians. So you get these aspects of violence in the course of the relationship.

And the relationship between Christianity and the Indian religion at Jemez, for one example, is a very interesting story. The two have been side by side for 400 years. The Indians go to mass, and they bury their dead in the campo sancto. But at the same time, they have their religious life at the kiva. I suspect that in a real pinch they go to the kiva instead of the church. But there's been this wonderful duality over a long period of time. Your question is complex, you know. I'm talking about one limited area, but, boy, you take the country as a whole, and you've got all kinds of stories.

Dennis Selder: You said, the Wild West was a place to

escape, escape the confines of religion or its morality, and its hold on their imaginations. And that the Native American people with their different beliefs provided a context for another way of looking at things.

N. Scott Momaday: One of the realities of the Wild West in the nineteenth century and earlier was that it was very hard to enforce law. People could get away with murder, literally. It became a place where freedom was confused with the ability to take the law into your own hands. And for some reason, we as a people find that exciting. We want to perpetuate the myth of the freedom of the frontier where you could wear guns on your hips and shoot people down on the streets of Tombstone. We think of that as being the good old days. And that's why you have the vestiges of that notion: people driving around Tucson with rifles in the back window of the pick-ups. And people shooting each other on the streets because somebody pulled in front of you in the left lane. That's pretty bad, but in some curious way it is explicable. It does fit into some kind of pattern of our thought processes.

Larry Evers: D. H. Lawrence in Studies in Classic American Literature talks in precisely these terms about Cooper's Deerslayer, particularly, and Americans, generally.

N. Scott Momaday: That's right. Yes.

Larry Evers: Could we return to another thing you said you

were working on, the question of the evolution of Native American literature? That's a topic of concern to us in this course. This watershed time that included publication of House Made of Dawn and Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee brought us forward into a period of great creativity in Native American writing. There's a lot more to read, and it seems better than it ever was, in terms of the number of authors and what they're writing. But there also for me is a dimension of going back. Before I read House Made of Dawn, I had never heard of D'arcy McNickle or John Joseph Matthews, or a number of earlier writers. So the movement seems to have gone in two ways. I wondered if you might comment on that?

N. Scott Momaday: (Rummaging in his bag, he retrieves a copy of The Surrounded.) You just reminded me to return your book.

Larry Evers: That's right. That's what it was all about, a recall. (Laughter.)

N. Scott Momaday: That's what I thought. Very devious. (Laughter.) Well, I have this sense that in 1969 when House Made of Dawn and Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee were published, within the context of Native American literature, things had been moving steadily to a certain point where they were ready to burst upon the scene. The roots are very, very deep, and very old. I have been studying Native

American oral tradition for many years now. And the more I look into it, the more I see that we have just begun to scratch the surface. It's an incredibly rich tradition. I know a little bit about Plains oral tradition, having heard a lot of Kiowa stories when I was little. I think that when we think about the origins of Native American literature we have to go far back in time. I wrote the initial chapter for the Columbia Literary History of the United States, which was published three or four years ago now. I did a very brash thing in that essay. I set the origins of American literature back a couple of thousand years. Because when I was a graduate student, I taught that American literature is derivative of English literature, that it begins with the Puritan intercession in New England in the seventeenth century. I looked up the word "literature" because there's always that confusion as between oral tradition and literature which seems to signify writing. And I found in my 7th Collegiate Webster's that the first definition of the verb "to write" is "to inscribe as on a surface." " To incise" is the word, as on a surface. And I thought, "hey, that's wonderful! We can now talk about rock paintings, and pictographs, petroglyphs, you know." So I said in that essay that American literature really begins with some man or woman, completely anonymous, dipping a daub of some kind into pigment and placing the

image in his mind's eye on the rock wall. I thought of these wonderful rock paintings at Barrier Canyon, Utah, for example. These wonder anthropomorphic forms there marching from geologic time into the present in some procession. And I said, "that's where American literature begins." We can argue that, you know, logically. Here is the first idea of the American landscape expressed by an American. Of course there were no "Americans" in those days. But you see the point.

Then you can find these wonderful verbal equations, which have never been written down or which have been written down only recently in translation. We have 35 or 40 anthologies of those things now. Not to mention the Smithsonian publications and Bureau of American Ethnology reports and so on. So the wealth of oral material which you can now obtain in print is astonishing. You have to look into that dimension in order to understand what happened in 1969. It was all there, and it was ready to be discovered. About the middle of the century, you know that explosion did finally come about, and it's been carried through with wonderful effect by people like Jim Welch, Louise Erdrich, and Joy Harjo, Luci Tapahonso, and Simon Ortiz. It's a real blossoming, and it's a wonderful thing to see. But you can't look at it without acknowledging the long line upon which it is based.

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Deirdre O'Malley: Could you say something about the story of the Arrowmaker? I'm familiar with it only from Charles Woodard's conversations with you.

N. Scott Momaday: It's one of the most intricate stories that I know. I think it is a story about language. The Arrowmaker saves himself and his family on the basis of what he says. What he does is incidental to what he says. It's a story about language. The arrows are metaphors for words. Every time I tell the story or think of it I see something new in it. It's an endless kind of story. If you're interested in that story, I wrote an essay called "The Man Made of Words" which deals rather closely with that story. It was published in The New York Times Book Review, May 5, I think, 1969.

Deirdre O'Malley: Thank you.

N. Scott Momaday: Yes.

Chadwick Allen: Your work has received a lot of critical attention. Some of it really praising, and some of it not so praising. I was wondering if you read that criticism, if it interests you in any way?

N. Scott Momaday: Yes, I guess the first thing to say is that I don't really hunt it down. I don't try to find out what everybody has said about my work, but I have read a lot of reviews and critical things. I'm always a little miffed when I think that someone has missed my point, you know. I

guess that's quite normal. I think my critics and reviewers have been very generous and on the whole I appreciate what they've said. Some of them have even given me insights into my work that I hadn't had before. That's always a good thing, but there have been some very irritating things too.

Jeanne Armstrong: I want to ask about the other project that you mentioned you're working on at the beginning of class, the one involving sacred ground.

N. Scott Momaday: Well, I have been for a very long time interested in the sacred, the sacred as it informs the Native American world especially. I wrote an essay for a Sierra Club calendar this year on sacred ground. So I really began thinking about that and now I think a book is coming out. I think Vine Deloria is doing something for it and other people. That will be another chance for me to articulate some of my ideas about the sacred. That's something that interests me very much.

We need to understand much more about the spiritual values and the sacred. We have museums which preserve physical artifacts and institutes which study environment and so on, but we don't really have something that is designed to preserve the sacred. Not sacred materials so much as the idea and ideal of the sacred. So, I'm very much interested in that.

Larry Evers: How would you do that?

N. Scott Momaday: Uh, you'd buy a large piece of ground in Oklahoma or New Mexico or Texas. You'd restore it to prairie grass, run buffalo on it. And then, somewhere right in the middle of all that, you'd build several buildings, one of which is a museum with a floating collection of sacred material. You'd have a library which contains things written on the sacred. And you would invite people there who are interested in talking about the sacred, who know something about it and can share ideas on a fairly advanced level. And you'd invite Native peoples to come, and children especially, to just spend time in the presence of sacred matter.

You didn't think I'd have the answer to that.

(Laughter.)

Larry Evers: More specific than I bargained for.

(Laughter.)

Elaine Tietjan: I've asked a form of this question to a few other of the speakers we have had, and I'm not sure where I stand on it yet myself. So, it's for me still very open-ended. When I hear discussion about the sacred and it being connected to land and landscape, I think of the people who are working "environmentally." I wonder how and when more bridges might be built between writers in the Native American renaissance and people who are trying to look at lands in perhaps a slightly different way. When you mention

a memorial to the sacred, I see the Nature Conservancy doing something vaguely similar, certainly not pointedly talking about the spiritual element. What would your observations or ideas be thinking ahead to the future? How will we ever preserve any of the land on which a lot of these stories and lot of the sacred things are built?

N. Scott Momaday: I don't know. That's a good question. It is something that I've thought about. A lot of people are thinking about it. Environmentalists, they do make room for the sacred. People like the Sierra Club do. They are concerned with sacred ground and the preservation of sacred ground. They're greatly alarmed that so much of it is threatened. But I still haven't discovered any environmental group primarily concerned with the spiritual. It seems to me that there is room for that. That preserving spirituality in the Native American world and in other worlds, God knows, is worth the same sort of effort that is given to the preservation of the bristle cone pine. It's as important and maybe even more important in certain ways. People are thinking about it. Nothing is being done about it to my knowledge, but I would like to see something done. I may even do something about it, if I can see a way to do it.

Linda?

Linda Bolton: I think it's in "Man Made of Words" you

speak to this idea. I can't quote it exactly, but you write that something that we could learn from the American Indian is a different kind of land ethic. And you speak of that ethic in very moral terms. We've been turning around this idea of a Native American poetics and what that might be, if it's possible to define such a thing. In your mind, would that be one of the elements of that poetics?

N. Scott Momaday: I think so. The Native American concept of the land, concept of the earth, is something that is extremely valuable in its own right and for its own sake. Western civilization has, I think, withdrawn from an adequate notion of the earth as spiritual. Western man in general tends to think of the earth as dead matter. It's something, it's minerals, it's mineral deposits that need to be extracted and used. The Native American has a very different idea of the earth. It is living matter. And it is deserving of the kind of respect that we give to living things. And it is possessed of spirit. You can construct a catalogue of values in the Native American world, ranging from the respect for language, to the reverence for the earth, to a sense of humor. These are all things that the Native American can contribute, and is willing to contribute if the rest of the world is willing to accept it. That's where we are, I think, at this point. But perhaps the most important is the notion of the earth as living matter.

Luther Standing Bear once wrote about that. "The old people love to touch the earth," he said. They like to take off their moccasins and touch their bare feet to the living earth. We live our lives without touching the earth. I have a friend in Brooklyn who was talking about his child. He had a little boy and little girl. They had grown up in Brooklyn. And one day, some workers had come and broken up the sidewalk. And the children were out there watching with deep fascination, because they didn't realize that there was dirt under there, you know. It came as a great revelation to them. That's a sad story, but it's a common one. We don't touch our bare feet to the earth.