

SIMON J. ORTIZ

February 3, 1992

Simon Ortiz: Thank you, all of you, for having me in your class this morning and on campus for tonight's reading. I want to make you feel welcome to ask anything really that you want, as long as it's not too personal! Well, but even then, I think that's a part of what literature is because literature is very serious business. Certainly writing which produces that literature is very critical in how I see myself personally. I'm from Acoma--Aaa cu--as you know, in New Mexico. Aaa cu is one of the oldest pueblos--Indian Pueblos--in New Mexico. It preceded anything European and it is a very ancient place. Yet at the same time that it's an ancient place, it's very present. Present in the sense that there's a mythic quality about Aaa cu and who the Acoma hano, the Acoma people are, ancient people and yet modern as the present day. I grew up within the Acoma culture. That's all that I really know. But obviously it's true that the Acoma culture is not an isolated nor a segregated society because it is one of the many societies and cultures and communities in this nation that we know as the United States of America. And one of the many societies, cultures, and nations in this whole global community that we know as the world. But Acoma, nevertheless, is the place from which I come, not only physically, but culturally. Which means spiritually. And in that mythical sense, I feel that it's also important to see myself in terms of that source. I see my existence as a human being in terms of how the Acoma

people conceive themselves, ourselves, as human beings.

I wrote a narrative script recently called Surviving Columbus, which is part of a documentary film which will be broadcast in the fall. It's being filmed now. I start with that mythic origin of the pueblo people. The mythic origin of the pueblo is in their literature and their oral tradition known as Shipa-po. It's that place of beginning, the place of beginning from which all life emerges, into the light, out of Shipa-po, the underplace or underworld. All life comes from there. So then I speak with that sense of origin, according to the Pueblo mythic, mythic-poetic sense of self. That's how I identify myself. I believe it is the way Native American peoples in general see themselves. When we speak as the original peoples in this continent, we have to look at how we conceive of our existence. Without that, you don't really exist. You're invisible. As an Acomehanoe, as an Acoma people, it's very precious and important and significant to us to say that "We are the first people." It confirms our existence. We are the first people in that mythic-poetic sense. We have to say that. We don't have any existence without that.

Politically, of course, in the contemporary age, there's another view on that. Western civilization has claimed for its own lands for which Indian communities are responsible. In claiming those lands, what Western civilization, beginning with Christopher Columbus, has done

is to attempt to sever that tie, to break that connection or break that responsibility. So that, that idea of the origin or the beginning, whether it's Shipa-po or another Indian term, that origin is no longer a part of our cultural identity. It's as if existence is taken away politically. We know that the Indian people in this country have been oppressed by the political, social system for 500 years. But I think sometimes it's threatening to the United States as a nation when we as Indian people claim our ownership. Well, in one sense, that's correct. We do claim ownership. But we really claim responsibility. Because without that responsibility then we don't really exist. We have to say that we are the land, we are part of how it exists, and we exist because of it. Land, culture and community are stressed over and over again in this narrative script called Surviving Columbus. It tells how we live the Pueblo story of land, cultures and community. Land, cultures and community are concepts that are interrelated. It has everything to do with who I am as a Aco-mehat-che, of the Acoma people. Without that concept I would be really no one. So, as an introduction, I want to say those few things and leave it up to questions that you have about my work, myself, and what my writing means. Hopefully, my writing is a catalyst for further thinking. I believe that writing by Native American people is really important to how this nation develops in its consciousness. Indian people are in

all different regions of this nation. Indian people are all over this hemisphere--from the Arctic Circle down to the tip of South America, Tierra del Fuego. Remember that this is the origin land, the homelands of many, many Indian people. Some Indian people are no longer here. Their cultures, languages, governments, social, cultural systems have been decimated. But still, the spirit of someone, something exists. And this is what we have to be aware of when we look at Native American or Indian writing. It is the literature that has that mythic-poetic nature.

I was a boy at McCarty's, or Deetsyama, the native name for McCarty's. McCarty's was an Irishman, an Irish railroad worker. As you may know, Irishmen among the whites built the railroads along with the Chinese, and the Mexicans, and the Indians, and the black people. Mostly poor people. McCarty's was a man who ran the water pumps for the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe railroad at Deetsyama. McCarty's is easier to pronounce than Deetsyama so it became McCarty's. I grew up at McCarty's or Deetsyama. I became conscious of my heritage in the way that most Indian people do, by living, experiencing. Nobody really tells you that. You do the things that you do in a family. I grew up in a rural community, farming, and taking care of our animals, a few sheep that my grandpa had. I would herd for him. Knowing myself and becoming part of the Acomehanoe through my family and my clan, the eagle clan or eagle people, I

became conscious of my heritage. Another part of the consciousness came about because of the differences that I found when I went to school. McCarty's Day School is a Bureau of Indian Affairs Day School in the village. That's where I went to school from the first through the sixth grade, except my fifth grade year. My father, who worked for the railroad, also lived in Skull Valley, Arizona, just up the road here. We lived there during one year when I was in the fifth grade. But McCarty's or Deetsyama, the Day School was where I first went to school.

As for the differences in language, I first went to pikiki, that was what we called the beginner's grade, beginning, beginner. It was kindergarten. We called it pikiki. I guess it derived from the word used colloquially for pickaninny, picayune, thus pikiki grade, I guess. Anyway, I only knew Acomesty-ne, the Acoma language, up to the time when I started the pikiki. Then, English was the other language that we were required to know. All of us in the late 40s, the generation that I grew up with, did not speak any language except the Acoma people's language. We became quickly aware that there was another language. It was called Mericano tse-ni, the American language. It wasn't English, it was the Mericano tse-ni, the American language. We still call white people "Mericano," "Americans." So early on, socially and politically, I became aware of the differences between "them" and "us."

And I was definitely an Acoma. Along with that, was how language was used against us to identify us, but more than that to keep us in our place. I'm sure that those of you who speak a language other than English, who come from a minority culture, have experienced the oppression of not speaking the majority language. It's a real powerful weapon, you know, that's used by the United States national culture to impose its ways, Mericano, American ways upon the indigenous peoples; Acoma is only one of them. I became aware of that difference, you know, because of the language use. I know that Indian people speak about the punishment that they had to endure for not learning or not speaking English quickly enough. I learned very well. I mean, you need to get punished and embarrassed and humiliated just about once, and then you learn to speak English pretty well. At the same time, within the family, clan, and the community, the Acommetsani, Aco-meh-meh, the language and the ways of the people are very important. So, as a result, I think the integrity of my native identity was very strong. At the same time, I know that the American ways and its language were very strong. There was a conflict. I believe that my own use of English offers for me a real opportunity for a consciousness to be at work. It's a conflict to some extent, but it's also a dynamic that can make me aware of its usefulness in enhancing consciousness of myself: how I perceive and what I then express with my work.

I only spoke the Acoma language before I went to the Bureau of Indian Affairs School, McCarty's Day School. Still, I think that a great deal of my consciousness is within that period when we all first become aware of language. We come into being as who we are very early. In the womb when we are coming to consciousness through the language that is most intimate, the first noises that we hear are the first language. It is that closeness, that intimacy enhanced by language, that I remember vividly in our community of Acu. The oral tradition is based upon spoken language. But it is more than that. Oral tradition is inclusive. It's the actions, behavior, relationships, practices throughout the whole social, economic and spiritual life of people. In this respect, the oral tradition is the consciousness of the people. I think at times, oral tradition is defined too strictly in terms of verbal manifestations in stories, songs, meditations, ceremonies, rituals, and clan and tribal histories passed from older generations to the next. Oral tradition evokes and expresses a belief system. It is specific activity that conveys that belief. In its most intimate, immediate sense, I believe that my own present-day consciousness goes back to how I came into being, as an Acoma person Acu-me-ahne mu-dehsih, back in that period when I first became conscious of language and then later on when I began to learn the Mericano-tse-ni or Mericano-me.

Now about reading, I loved to read, I still love to read. My eyes are getting poor, but I still love to read. Because reading was simply an extension of the oral tradition for me, of the Acoma language, that didn't really change, but in a sense became facilitated in another language, English. That may sound like a contradiction. That English replaced Acoma. It really wasn't for me. Reading was fun. I quickly learned how to read. I know it's because I loved language and stories. Leslie Silko and I, when she was very young and wanted to write, we used to talk about stories, how stories are fun. Actually we used to gossip a lot. Stories are gossip, gossip are stories, right? Up to the point of going to school, I loved the sounds of language and what was being told. I would listen avidly to just about anything. I eavesdropped a lot, I still do, so better watch out what you say around me (general laughter). My father teased me by calling me a reporter. Early on I associated reading with oral stories. It was not difficult to learn to read and subsequently to write. All in English, of course, as there was no such thing as bilingual education then. Now, minimally, a few schools provide it. My mother read to us too, perhaps even before I started school. But my real interest and love of reading had to do with stories. I heard stories all my life, ranging from the very traditional to the history of the Acoma-Mericano relations, to current gossip. Stories

were told about the people of the Acoma in the community, our relatives, both living and long ago. There were stories of mythic people and beings who were wanderers and heroic and even magical. Some stories were funny, some sad. All were interesting and vitally important to me, because though I could not explain it then, they tied me to the communal body of my people and heritage.

I could never hear enough of the stories. Consequently, when I learned to read and write, I believe I felt those stories continued somehow in the new language, English. They would never be lost and finally gone. They would always continue. You can say that in this new language, this other language, Mericano, that the stories of the People continue. The Acoma stories, culture, way of life, spirituality, and so forth continue on with the use of another language.

Linda Stewart: I am interested in the statement in which you said the struggle for the land will continue and is in the stories of the oral traditions. In a lot of your poetry you talk about physical struggles, about strikes and about the uprising of 1680, and I would like to know more about the relationship between stories and that physical struggle.

Simon Ortiz: Well, I graduated from high school in 1960. The first job I had was with an energy company, Kerr-McGee. If anybody is from Oklahoma, you know what Kerr-McGee is. It is an oil company, but it is mining uranium and

processing it in the Ambrosia Lake area, which is north, northeast of Acoma, just about thirty miles north of Acoma. Lots of the Acoma people worked at the mine. Boys worked up there beginning in the late fifties. The uranium development continued in that region till the late seventies. By 1980 they were pretty much closed down due to the uranium market becoming depressed. Well, I grew up with stories before the uranium era, listening to my father, my uncles and other working men. As I said, my father worked the railroads. The railroads had come through Acoma lands, beginning in the 1880s or so. That was the first real industrial change, the industrialization of the native Pueblo lands. People had moved a lot during the 1940s, during the World War, and later on the Korean War. Then again during the relocation era, the termination era, there were government policies to depopulate Indian rural lands or reservations and, also, to assimilate, or force the assimilation of Indian people into the American way of life, into the American mainstream in the 1950s. Well, during the late fifties, and then on to the sixties, with the opening of the uranium mines and processing plants, many of the people began to work up there. I had grown up with stories of working for the railroads, or working in the defense plants in California and locally.

When I went to work, I rode in car pools with oil field workers--guys from Oklahoma, the Gulf of Mexico, Louisiana,

West Virginia, and Canadian coal miners, and some uranium mine workers from Canada, then too copper miners from Montana, Arizona, and Colorado. I mean working-class types. Real grunts of the mining industry. I was scared by some of their stories, because they were pretty racist. The rugged characters, some held views that were at that time very typically white, working-class attitudes. But their stories of trying to raise their standards of living, trying to survive with a minimum of education, sounded very much like the stories I had grown up with in my own family.

They also usually came from rural farming backgrounds in Tennessee, or Louisiana, or Oklahoma. They were land-based people. You know, they were talking about how it was to have a garden, or fields, and a few animals. I identified with them and, in reverse, they identified with the Indian people. Notwithstanding some of the social attitudes that were there. So, the stories were kind of common meeting ground, it seemed to me. That's what I try to point out in some of the stories like "To Change in a Good Way," in Fight Back. The Okies, people from Oklahoma, and the people from Laguna Pueblo, they were able to share the struggle in their common lives with each other.

Dennis Selder: Your stories are non-confrontational, not adversarial, in terms of dealing with racism. Do you feel the stories were a good way to present your attack on racist points of view?

Simon Ortiz: Confrontations, and issues which provoke confrontations, are useful. They are useful because they dramatize and publicize and make very visible issues that need to be faced. Racism needs to be faced in this country. You have to present them to some extent confrontationally. At the same time, I feel that people also have to be offered a way in which they can practically work at their solutions on their own terms.

I think this has a lot to do with honesty, just plain honesty. Sometimes that is pretty painful and scary when we tell ourselves about our weaknesses. When we tell ourselves about our biases sometimes we have to admit that we are wrong. It means breaking down what we have relied on for so long. For example, I know that for minority people, it is pretty easy to blame the dominant culture. It is the enemy, the dominant culture, that is causing me to not be successful. That is true to some extent. White supremacy is a pretty significant factor in minority development, you know, and the loss of self-esteem that comes from certain dominant practices. That system of superiority, the hierarchy, that white is better than brown is down below somewhere. Well, that idea is only useful to an extent. Minority people, Indian people included, have to look at themselves, like white people have to look at themselves. The alternative you offer people is a chance to be honest with themselves. People need to realize what the

predicament is for themselves, and on their own terms. Sometimes they don't want to see it, so therefore you have to spell it out for them.

Confrontation in that sense, but nothing that is dishonest, or nothing that's just plain manipulative or opportunist. The need is to confront people with an honest reality and then to help them come to terms with that. Back in the early seventies, I was working with the National Indian Youth Council in Albuquerque. It was a radical group, political group, Indian advocacy group. I was sitting at my desk and looking out across Central. I saw this Indian man fall down in front of this movie theater. So I got up from my chair and crossed the street. It was a cold, cold winter day, slightly snowing, slush in the street. I picked the man off the street and I said, "Father, come inside and let's get warm. It's cold out here." He was drunk and sick. He talked to me. He was talking to me in Jemez, the Jemez language. So I helped him inside and gave him something to drink. Coffee. And he got warm. I wrote a poem about that later. I wrote about this man, about him falling down. The poem concludes with the line, "I let you see into me/in order that you may see yourself."

If I present myself, me, who I am, Simon, from Acoma Pueblo, it gives a way for other people to look at themselves. I let you see into me in order that you may see

yourself. That's an alternative, and so a confrontation.

Yes.

Nina Bjornsson: You are speaking to one of the things we have talked about in this course, the role of the American Indian writer and who their audiences are. How do you see your role as an Indian writer?

Simon Ortiz: Everybody. (Laughter.) Native American writers have to be responsible to that source of who they are. It is an advocacy position, you know, to be able to continue as who we are, to sustain ourselves, and to be nourished by our cultural source. You have to be an advocate, but an advocate who is responsible. Back to the (our) beginning of time, our existence as Acoma people. The responsibility of Native American writers is really to be an advocate for this way of looking at life. This includes white people.

My father was an antelope elder, kusi-am, kusi-ano. He was antelope clan father or leader. He used to say that "when I pray," that when he prayed, "I pray for everybody," he said, whether they are sha mu tsa no (white people) or mitsi ano (black people) or kash du ra (Chinese), or whoever, because everybody needs prayers. In the same way that prayers are for everybody, literature and writing that produces the literature includes everyone and all things. Not just people but all things.

Deirdre O'Malley: I was wondering if you can talk about the

process of overcoming powerlessness?

Simon Ortiz: Overcoming powerlessness. To be able to stand up. If anybody has experienced powerlessness in this nation it's ethnic minorities and women. There is so much in common. To overcome powerlessness for minorities, I know, is to state an assertion, to claim responsibility for ourselves. The federal government needs for its purposes to keep Indian people, specifically, powerless in order to claim ownership of these national lands. To claim power it is important for Native American people to exist culturally, spiritually, socially, and politically. In 1973 at Wounded Knee the stand the Lakota people decided to make was not just one little event. The stand they made meant they were looking at the Black Hills and the Lakota Nation as a whole, you know. To make a stand involves a physical stand, for one thing, but also it's a political stand in terms of your organization, your tribal self-government, tribal sovereignty. That is very, very important, because then you are asserting a nationhood, that you have a right to exist on your terms with your system of beliefs and the way that you want to relate to other people, the United States, as well as the state governments and other nations. I know that so much is determined by our attitudes about ourselves. Native American people in many respects have felt powerless due to loss of self-esteem. So it begins, really, with ourselves, spiritually and emotionally, to be able to say

this is who I am and this is who I believe, and this is who I love and respect. To have that dignity.

I am a recovering alcoholic. One of the really important things in my continuing sobriety is a sense of love and respect and self-esteem. Without that, I believe that there is a neurotic sense of self that would destroy any positive self-esteem and would destroy my sobriety. The United States as a whole, I think, has many symptoms similar to an alcoholic such as me. In order not to be the aggressive, maniacal, imperialist country, it needs a good system of recovery. But to get back to what you are saying, it really begins with a sense of affirmation, self-affirmation. I think that women in this country and minority people have some real good, strong collaboration in political and social, cultural issues that are very encouraging for the recovery of this country as a whole.

Catherine Young: I have another question about the powerlessness. In one of your stories about Herb, "The Hard Core," he asked you all those questions, but you never were, I guess you could say, honest with him when you said you did not know. And I just wondered why you felt powerless to answer him. Was it because you felt that no matter what you said he wasn't going to change his opinion? Why didn't you explain the way you felt?

Simon Ortiz: I was nineteen years old at that time. I had grown up mostly on the reservation at Acoma. We were a

minority in New Mexico and in the high school, Grants High School, I attended. Grants is nearby, our reservation town, where most of the miners, the white miners lived. And workers who worked for Philips Petroleum, Mobil, Sohio, Kerr-McGee, and the other companies were there. Anaconda Corporation and all the big companies in the United States were mining uranium in that region.

And so as a minority I felt powerless, as a member of a minority, I felt powerless, in the way that colonized peoples feel that they really have no place. They are supposed just to be quiet, and shy, and stoic and suffering. So you grow up really with a sense that, well, I am nobody, nothing. Nobody is going to listen anyway. It's just hiding. Really, hiding.

Catherine Young: We can avoid the confrontation that way.

Simon Ortiz: Right. So, it's an emotional, psychological powerlessness, you know. You prefer to be, in quotes, "a dumb Indian" because that's the safe thing to do. And sometimes I know that it's a role you play. You play the safest thing. That is ingrained. So I have to really be conscious of that, not to do that.

Catherine Young: But at the same time you were saying "I don't know" were you thinking to yourself, "this guy will never understand, I'm not going to waste my breath trying to explain to him"? At the same time, you play the role in your own mind, so you are putting yourself above the person

saying, you know, "I'm not going to explain, I'm not going to waste my breath." I feel that sometimes when I am trying to explain things to people. Instead of trying to express the way that I really feel, I'll just say "I don't know." I'm not going to waste my time.

Simon Ortiz: They may not understand or, maybe in truth, it's more the case that they're not going to accept your answer. They're not going to accept you. Essentially, they're not accepting you. So, therefore, you prefer that stereotype. I guess that's the situation. For minority people, assertion is hard to come by. I know that for women, sometimes it's easier not to be the threatening one that men sometimes perceive, you know.

Susan Stevens: In your poem "Watching Salmon Jump," I was wondering how you see us "leaping into rock" so that our "children may survive"?

Simon Ortiz: That old poem, lots of my images come from how I see myself in relation to the natural environment. I've always been intrigued with the search and the struggle for life. And in this case, it is exemplified by salmon going upstream to spawn against the current, and against the elements. What you have to do is to become so involved in facing whatever the environmental natural reality is. That is your survival. That is the significance of the act of jumping or leaping into the current, onto rock, that's what you do. That's how you survive.

Socially, I think that in terms of human society, and human struggle, we leap into the hard rocks, and hard events, circumstances of reality, so that the generations may survive. I have heard elders say that you live in a way so that tese yo-ko mi a hama tri kai t'sa ni keni eme ne tako. You live in a way so that many years or generations from now life may be possible. I guess you could say that is the translation. When I think about myself, I see myself not necessarily as what I'm involved with today, but with what my grandfathers and grandmothers did. During the 1680 Pueblo revolt, the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico, along with others, revolted against the Spanish civil, church, and military rule and drove them out. Acoma had been destroyed in 1599 and almost disappeared. Some pueblos did disappear.

But the people insisted on their lives, on a way in which they would survive. One of the ways, obviously, to survive was to assert themselves in an armed revolt. Fighting for their lives included, in that case, taking some lives. It was necessary. The priests, missionary priests, Catholic priests who were partners with the military and civil Spanish officials were among the targets for the Pueblo people, my grandmothers and grandfathers. So it was necessary for them to take action in the way that they did-- in armed revolt.

I think about myself in terms of what they must have thought. If the people in 1680 and subsequent generations

did not think and act and believe as they did, I would not exist. This relates, I think to that sense of continuity, which refers to that term I used earlier--the mythic-poetic sense of self. It is hard factual history that determines our destiny.

I am thankful to the grandfathers and grandmothers, not just because I carry their genes but because of that mythic continuity. I am really thankful to a Zuni man who says, "Always tell a story from the beginning." Zuni Pueblo elders tell this to their young. So the story that you hear, to a large extent, by Native American writers is a story from the beginning. It refers not only to how we conceive of our origin, but to what has taken place since then. The stories and traditions have continued on through the responsibility taken by the grandfathers and grandmothers.

Joni Clarke: In your poem "That's the Place the Indians Talk About," there is a stanza that says "the people are talking/telling the power come to them/and pretty soon it will come." Could you talk about the connection between Earth power coming in this poem and telling stories and "continuance"?

Simon Ortiz: That's a lot. Let me tell you just a little bit about that poem first of all, "That's the Place That the Indians Talk About," because I think it illustrates a lot of what I'm saying, what you're asking me. I was at a meeting

near Bishop, California, in Southern California, out in the Shoshonean Basin. The Shoshonean peoples, the Paiute people, were having a meeting about the Coso Hot Springs. And this man, Henry, was telling. He was just an old, cowboy range-rider in his 80s standing by a truck. I didn't know too much about what the meeting was about. Me and my wife went down there to that meeting. He just talked with me. He was telling me, he said, "This is the place that Indian people are talking about. This Coso Hot Springs. We would go up there many years ago in our wagons or horses or we would walk. But nowadays we go there with trucks or cars. That's the place we're talking about." And then he said, "It was a hot springs and mud, you know, that they used for healing. And you would put it on your hands, your faces, wherever you were hurting and you would get all well. But now you can't do that because you have to ask the government, the government. The Navy of the government has a big weapons-testing facility, China Lake Naval Station, there. It's all military-use, Department of Defense property now. You have to get permission on certain days to go up to that place. That's the place Indian people are talking about." And then in his traditional knowledge of the place, he says, "When you go up there you can hear and you can feel the Earth moving down there. You know that this is the power of the Earth. This is the place from where we come. Listen. That's the way," he said. "Listen,

that's the way you hear. Hearing those stones. That's the way you listen. That's the place the Indian people talk about. That's the place."

What he was saying, of course, is what, I think, Native people refer to as the power of the Earth, the Source, you know. It's physical as well as the spiritual connection. The Mother as the Earth--De na ya, de yi tik--the sustaining or nourishing mother. Without that there is no place, you know. In other words, it is the place of identity. Even though the China Lake Naval Station may have that fence around there, or the Department of Defense has that weapons testing facility there, it is still the Earth. He says one day those fences will come down. One day we will be able to go out there and heal ourselves and be who we are. I believe that's how indigenous people of this hemisphere see the reality of our lives. Almanac of the Dead, Leslie Silko's novel, speaks about that eventuality.

We better end with this. There is hope. This is from the end of "Surviving Columbus: Living the Pueblos Story of Land, Culture, and Community." There is hope, nonetheless, and it is in what past generations of our people have always said. As long as we keep believing in and living by the ways of our people, we'll continue. As long as the story of our struggles, which is like the story of all people who deeply love and respect themselves and their culture, community and land, is told, we the people will continue.

The story then will always have the mythic power of the legend that is the present. When this story has that power, all life will continue and all life will have existence. This is what that old Paiute Henry said one day, "This is the place that Indian people talk about." When all things really have existence life will continue. Well, thank you.