

Poetics and Politics

Sarris 1

GREG SARRIS

March 9, 1992

Poetics and Politics

Greg Sarris: It's great to be here. It's always fun to come to Tucson. I don't know what it is about Tucson. It's great audiences.

Larry and Ofelia gave me a list of questions which they probably sent five times. I kept deliberately losing them, probably because I didn't want to answer them. No, in fact, if you've read my books and all my writing, it has a lot to do with these very questions. I'll give you some background and then open it up for discussion.

How I came to start writing the kinds of essays that I write mixing the different kinds of discourses is a place to begin. I was just talking with Larry about how difficult that'll be when I go up for tenure. I said my biggest audiences are women and graduate students. And I said, "people who have no power, right?" Well, isn't that the case? For me the question of politics and poetics is an interesting question because for me they're inseparable. The poetics of your writing become, of course, the politics. Let me give you a little background.

I had no intention of becoming a university professor. I went to UCLA on a football scholarship. I grew up in Santa Rosa, California, and was mainly interested in sports, partying, and all of that. I did all of it pretty well. I always had a difficult time with school. I felt somehow out of it. It wasn't until I got to UCLA that I began to put

Poetics and Politics

things together and understand what was going on with me, and, in turn, for many other people.

I went to UCLA. It was very interesting because where I come from it wasn't such a big thing to be Indian. In fact, people always would say, "Well, you know, Greg, you're light-skinned. You can pass. Don't say you're Indian, say you're Spanish, or say you're Mexican, or something like that. But don't say you're Indian." And then I got to UCLA and people've been reading Carlos Castaneda. They're flocking to me, wanting me to have a vision on the spot, you know?

One of the things I was always doing was taking courses where I thought I could get by easily and wouldn't have to write much. So, I saw one that was being offered, American Indian Literature, and I thought, "Oh, great, I'll go in there and tell them some story and, that'll be it." So I went in there and, of course that's exactly what happened. First of all, it was interesting because they had us sit around and smoke a pipe and get a so-called Indian experience. Where I come from, you don't do that. Medicine people smoke pipes, and you don't touch that stuff. That's highly taboo. Also, we have the thing about menstruating women, and you know, this was a room full of about thirty people. About eighteen were women. And, so, it was very uncomfortable, uneasy for me.

Poetics and Politics

Anyway, they had me tell a story. I told a creation story so I wouldn't have to write a paper. It was about Coyote and Frog-Woman and how they were married and how they were lovers and all of this. And I remember starting to laugh because, as I was telling the story, I was thinking of the woman who told it to me. It's my great-auntie Susie who was a wild, crazy woman. She had seventeen kids by eight or nine different guys. And at seventy-five, she'd had diabetes and had a foot removed. And she had an artificial foot, and she still loved men. And so when a strange man came into the room, she'd pull off her shoe and throw it at a man and then pull up her dress. And, of course, when you brought friends home from college, that was always overwhelming for them, to say the least.

Anyway, I was thinking of Susie, Auntie Susie, doing this. And, of course, they were writing it down and taking notes, trying to analyze everything I was doing, because it was a text. I was a text. And it was then, Class, that I began to realize the great discrepancies between hearing a story at home and reading in the classroom. Now, I'm speaking specifically for Pomo, Kashaya Pomo. I was talking to Ofelia about this last night, I don't know about other Indian tribes, except for what I've read. But for us, a story's meaning and story's life is as much dependent on the "here" as it is on the speaker. You're the one who is in a

Poetics and Politics

position to make that story meaningful. As my Auntie Mabel McKay said, "Don't ask me what it means, the story. Life will teach you about it the way it teaches you about life." And my Auntie Violet Chappell says, "For us, a word or a story, for us Indians, makes us wonder, makes us wonder. You know why? Because we're going to carry it with us for a long time, for our entire life." She says we wonder about the songs, the story's songs, its genealogy, its own stories that go with it. She says, we wonder because we don't know everything. She says the white man is different, "He don't want to know what he don't know."

I begin thinking about this. Again, for us, a story is never complete. It is ongoing. The "here," on the other hand, cannot know everything, is not in the position to frame or make sense of the text. What have we learned to do in school? Just the opposite. The story has all the meaning contained in it, and it's our job somehow to get that out and fix it. The text is something that's separate from us. And this is, again, tied to cultural differences.

For us, you know, a coyote was a creator but he was a trickster. So that, all of creation, to some extent, is, could be, a trick or a joke on you. That positions you as someone who has to make sense of what's around you. But in trying to make sense and order your world, you can also become foolish like coyote, right? So you're constantly

Poetics and Politics

de-centered as a knower, as someone who knows it all, right? And you're always cautious at having to reflect and think about who am I and what am I doing in this situation. Which is very different from Biblical notions of creation, which is linear and fixed. You know exactly where you sit on the Great Chain of Being, right? And there's not a joke, or anything going on here. There's a text that you learn and you figure out your place in it. And for us, the place is always changing, always moving, and you can't know it all.

Well, what was important about this is that I began to think about this whole notion of chasms. What I had done, and what most students do to some degree, particularly ethnic minority students, is we learn to put who and what we are and how we think on the back burner. We adjust to the classroom experience.

Think of the Dick and Jane situation. How many of us had homes and lives like Dick and Jane and Spot? I mean Spot, that most antiseptic representative of dogdom, right? Where I come from the dogs chase chickens, they chase cars, they're full of fleas. Well, what you learn is what is in the text is something academic. It's not from life. It's not what you know. You're not given the opportunity in our reading practices to talk back to that and say, "well, yes, but this is my story." What you learn to do is take that

Poetics and Politics

story and somehow learn how to get it right. At least spit it back to the teacher. And what happens as a result is this huge chasm begins to form, a kind of schizophrenia. You're one person with one kind of knowledge in the classroom, and who and what you are at home stays home.

It goes on through college. In a Sociology I course, they tell you the nuclear family is comprised of mother, father, siblings. For many of us, it's also auntie, uncle, and grandma and grandpa. What happens when we're not in a position to talk back, to say, "wait a minute, for whom does that definition hold and who wrote that definition? What culture do they come from?" This kind of silencing, this chasm that goes on is political. Inadvertently or not, it's political. It's the thing that maintains, that helps maintain, a certain kind of discourse about certain kinds of things in the Academy where we learn. We fit in as long as we can talk about those certain things in certain ways.

Now we're trying to open up the canon. Well, great. But are we still going to talk about American Indian literatures, for instance, in the same ways that we've been talking about Shakespeare? Can we use Freud and other kinds of framing theories for these texts? I think not. I think we might, but what we need to do is use Indian points of view and experiences to inform the theory. Rather than have the theory continue to inform us or frame us. So we have to

Poetics and Politics

go backwards and how can we do that unless we begin to cross that chasm, unless we begin to use what's personal in our own life and feel empowered to do that.

And so, it's been a hard thing for me, as I was telling Larry on the way over, writing the essays, my critical essays. I didn't really have any models. Some of the feminists have been great models for me, Cixous and some other people who try to do this. But I also wanted to go a step further to show how I'm continuing the story of the text or the people I'm talking to, how I'm making it, how I'm continuing culture.

Remember here: The issue for American Indian writers, even if we're writing, even if it's Ofelia, who's writing in her own language, is that now it's become literate. She's changing forms to some extent. What are the consequences of writing? What are we doing as we're writing? We're mixing cultures. The boundaries of culture, we have to see, are not impermeable. They are porous. They are always going to be a mixing of things. And I want my essays, both my critical work, as I call it, and my fiction to be examples of those crossings of boundaries where we see culture and history in the making. So my essays and my work, I hope, are documents of movement, of cultural interaction, where we try to learn and open up.

I try to show myself learning and growing as much as

Poetics and Politics

possible. What I'm hoping to do in my work is collapse that dichotomy between the critical and the personal, or the subjective and the objective. As we know now, more and more, the objective has become contextualized, and we know it to be what? Subjective. That doesn't mean we can't be critical. What we need is many voices informing one another. A crossing so that objective kinds of stances can be informed by subjective kinds of stances. Certain stories can inform certain theories and vice versa.

I think too much of what's going on in the Academy now is this polarizing of people and of cultures and of ideas. Of course, things don't work in separate camps, even if we're separate and fighting, we're still together. Let's talk about the ways we're together, as difficult as it may be. We may be angry, and all of that, but unless we try to be honest, and unless we use our work as a political device to talk about who and what we are, we're going to keep perpetuating these false notions of culture or separateness. So what I'm doing in my writing is, in fact, trying to show an intermingling of cultures and an intermingling of different voices within each of those cultures.

It's been a somewhat difficult thing for me to do, but I feel it's necessary and it's honest. I've had great mentors. I've had Mabel McKay and the Indian people who raised me. They always said be strong. In my fiction, in my

Poetics and Politics

critical work, in my teaching, and in my politics, I'm always trying to use this model of keeping myself whole as I'm talking, as a speaker.

As I said, so far, it's women and graduate students who are my greatest fans. That's encouraging because the graduate students are the people who are going to come, and we're going to be in power. I did end up getting a job at UCLA, and I will be going up for tenure. And, you know, UC Press is publishing my book. Maybe all the people who are behind me are biting their nails, but, nonetheless, it's happening.

I encourage each and every one of you to examine the voices within you as you're reading other books. The purpose of reading American Indian literature or African-American literature, or Shakespeare for that matter, is not to be an African-American or an Indian or Shakespeare but to further understand who and what you are, your boundaries in relationship to all these things.

So many times, non-minority students at UCLA, and elsewhere, will say to me, "Well, what's the purpose in taking this class? I'm white. I'm McDonald's. I don't have any culture." And I say, wait a second. You do. Those of us who are on the margins, who've been marginalized, we're always forced to negotiate who we are in terms of a dominant culture. So, we're very aware of our

Poetics and Politics

boundaries, always. If you're women, you're always aware of power structures. If you're in a position where you don't have to be aware of those, you tend to assume, "hey, I have no boundaries, I have no culture." And by reading other people, you see, "wait a minute, I do have a culture and it's interacting with other cultures and we're all in this together." So the opportunity for reading other kinds of literatures is to learn about yourself as much as it is the Other.

Susan Stevens: About what you said about chasms? I didn't understand. You were talking really fast and I didn't catch it all, but you said something about theories and chasms.

Greg Sarris: Yes. Well, there's always that chasm there, that block between what we know and we're expected to know. We always use theory to go home and explain what goes on at home. What I was suggesting is, "let's use what we know from home, let's feel strong about that to inform the theories." The simple definition I gave here was the example of a class where the definition of a nuclear family is this. Instead of thinking, "oh my god, I'm dysfunctional," that big word, "because my family, Auntie, was really like the mother to me." Instead of thinking that, you can raise your hand and go, "Well, wait a minute. Who did they study and who wrote this definition, this theory of the nuclear family? It doesn't hold for my

Poetics and Politics

community." So we've got to adjust the theory. We've got to adjust the definition. At least say, it's for these people and not mine. Does that make sense?

Susan Stevens: Yes.

Greg Sarris: Okay. Yes?

Deirdre O'Malley: Your ideas are exciting. They make the classroom sound a lot more challenging. But in terms of teaching, your teaching now, how do you approach literature that way with students? Do you find that to be a big challenge?

Greg Sarris: Yes, because what has happened is by the time any of us gets to the university, we're done in. We're big chasms. We've learned to adjust. People who probably had the right intuitions have unfortunately dropped out because they got disaffected. How often do we hear our students, our children say, "I can't relate anymore. I don't relate to this." And of course then they get into other things that aren't so good usually.

What I have done, what I am doing is, I do a lot of exercises where I bamboozle my students in the first few days to de-center them. I will tell stories from my culture, then have them tell them back. And inevitably what they discover is they're telling more about who and what they are than what they heard. They're going, "oh, my god, I do that?"

Poetics and Politics

I wrote about this in the College English essay. When I tell a coyote story, I say that for us things were already in existence. The students are obsessed with getting things in a linear order. I point out in the text, there was already a man and woman there. There wasn't a creation of a man and woman. Things like that get them to think.

What I do, in addition, is I have them keep personal journals about their personal responses to texts. And this is a lot of work for the teacher, particularly when you have large classes. When they first turn the journals in, what I always find is plot summary. I go back and I say, "Don't you people have real lives? Do you love your mother or father? Do you have sex? Why'd you put those clothes on? Who are you? Talk back to the text. What're you about? Is it speaking to you?" And, believe it or not, in a ten week period, you should see what these journals look like. At the end, when they start saying, "This reminded me of my mother and this made me think of this and it helped me think of that," they start telling stories back. And so many of the students, in the reviews of my classes, say, finally, they were reminded of why they liked literature in the first place. Because it spoke to us. It touched our lives. It made reading fun again. Meaningful.

It's a lot of work. But again, you have to do that. A lot depends on the instructor, you have to enable your

Poetics and Politics

students to feel comfortable about speaking, that there isn't a right way or a wrong way, that there are many ways and let's talk about the many ways.

Dennis Selder: Did you experience that chasm yourself in your own writing?

Greg Sarris: Oh, sure. When I first started writing academic essays, they always told me, "keep the 'I' out." So I would come up with a theory, you know, just as we were trained. I'd have a thesis with a stated theory, and I was going to back that up with things I found in the text. "Red" means this here. Well, now look, I found all these instances of red, and so it must mean that. That's what it means, right? I mean, that's the kind of thing I did. I felt so empty and dissatisfied. I would not have continued. I would have gone back to ditch-digging or horses or the canneries or something, before I would have continued that way, because for me that's a kind of death. If our job in the institution is to perpetuate life, its stories, and to somehow get people to learn, I didn't see that fitting the bill. Not for me and not for a lot of people who are around me.

Dennis Selder: So, how did you overcome that?

Greg Sarris: Well, it was almost by accident in the actual writing. I mean I knew, I understood this in my head but I didn't have a way to begin practicing it until I was trying

Poetics and Politics

to write the life stories of Mabel McKay, the old Indian woman who raised me. I would try to get a straight text, like, "Okay, Mabel, tell me the story of your life." And it would always come back to me. And she'd wind around and she'd undermine everything I was doing. And, I thought, how can I do this? I finally said, "Mabel, can't you tell just a straight story? Now, come on. I need to know from here to here to here what happened. You know, we drive around the country all this time. I'd say, "I've known you thirty years and this is all you do, you know. And, you know, if you want a book, this isn't going to happen." And she goes, "Oh, okay. I was born here. I did this. And then I did this. And then I did this. And now I'm old." She goes, "Is that what you want?" She goes, "That's the way the white people are." What turned out in writing, even essays about writing her, is that I had to talk about all the problems in my interaction with her. And she really taught me. She gave me the model. So if I had to do it with her, I'd have to do it with everything around me. And talk about who and what I am here. How I'm placed in all of this.

Dennis Selder: So, it's becoming conscious of your place in relation to...

Greg Sarris: It's a wonderful learning experience. She's made me think more and more about who I am as an Indian, who I am as a mixed blood, all of this kind of thing. Who I am

Poetics and Politics

in terms of generations. I'm not her generation. And I'm not a woman. And I'm not a medicine person. So, she's always reminding me of that. What I ended up writing is the story of my story of hearing her stories. I would call it a bi-autobiography. It's the story of two of us.

She's not interested in her text, per se. She's not interested in a story. As I look back now, she's bamboozled me. She just wanted a chance to teach me something. Because she said I was very dense and stupid and slow. You know, she said, "You got too much white in you. It's coming out all over." So she wanted to teach me, and she used that.

She's in a convalescent home now, and she'd had a bad stroke. I was up at my aunties' on the Rez at a prayer ceremony. A lot of things clicked for me. I went back to her and I said, "Mabel, why didn't you just tell me what you were doing? Why didn't you just do this?" And she didn't answer me, and she just kind of laughed and I said, "Well, why did you even bother?" And she looked at me and she said, "Because you kept coming back." You know, if you keep trying, and allow her to keep interrupting, she's a phenomenal person.

And the way she handled audiences. People would interview her as an Indian medicine woman and they'd say, "Well what do you do for poison oak?" And she'd say,

Poetics and Politics

"Calamine lotion." Again, look what it does, the question assumes she's this pre-contact thing in a bush. And she's going to go out there and pull some sap out of something, they're going to get some esoteric knowledge. What she said is, "Yes, I'm Indian, I'm a medicine woman. I'm also a contemporary American." She redefined the student's notion of what it meant to be Indian.

I remember a professor, Ken Lincoln. Well, she talked about how she met Essie Parrish, this other medicine woman, in dream twenty years before she met her in person. And Ken Lincoln thought he'd be kind of hip and go along with this whole thing, and he says, "Well I guess, Mabel, you recognized her when you finally saw her?" Mabel said, "Yeah, but she cut her hair a little bit." Right, you know? And she's always turning the questions back on themselves.

Once a panel of psychologists was interviewing her. She was talking about a medicine man who had helped her and how he used always to get put in jail for non-child support. But he'd turn into a botfly, the story went, and fly out the window and get out. And then the jail keepers would see him walking up the street and say, "How did you do that?" And he said, the old man said, "Well, if you give me four cigarettes, and you don't watch me, you can chain me up, do whatever, just go out and sit on the front steps. If you give me four cigarettes and lock me up any way you want, if

Poetics and Politics

I come walking back up the street, will you let me out?" And they said, "Yes." And, of course, they gave him four cigarettes, and he went out. And the psychologists were listening to this, and they said, "Well, Mabel, do you really believe that he turned into a botfly and went out the window?" You know, they were getting ready to deal with another world view here. And Mabel said, "no," and you could see them just sigh relief, "Good, she's kind of like us." And then Mabel said, "I think he went down the toilet."

So, again, if those people were to write about their interactions with her they'd have the same opportunity. What she's done is she's busted open cultural presuppositions about her.

Larry Evers: I'm interested in asking about a line that you draw for yourself. As we were walking over, we were talking about the difficulty some academics have in pigeonholing you, a folklorist, literary scholar, American Indian Studies person, and so on. Two ways that you offer your work to us are as short stories and as critical essays. How do you think about the relation between those two forms? Just listening to you talk this morning, it sounds like the definition of the two is very much the same for you.

Greg Sarris: It is. I want to experiment more in fiction with different voices. And in my fiction, I use different

Poetics and Politics

voices, and represent a mixing of cultures where I hope to show people who happen to be Indians, rather than Indians who happen to be people. I do do that. It's a mixing of the voices, Larry. Of hearing those voices. And in the shorter short stories, it's hard. But in the larger novels, I've got a draft of one, I've got many people telling the same stories over from different voices. And you've got a young person at the center of the novel, trying to make sense of it all. And finally he sees how he's implicated in the whole thing.

Larry Evers: What keeps one of your essays from being a short story in your understanding?

Greg Sarris: It's a form. I would say, a new form perhaps, of a short story. But it's not fiction in the sense that it, at least, leans toward autobiography than fiction, okay? It's more in line with autobiography. It also mixes kinds of discourses that, so far, my short fiction has not. Critical theory and so forth, those kinds of discourses that so far I haven't seen in short fiction. I'll talk about Bakhtin, or somebody like that, where I wouldn't do that in my fiction. That's just a voice, I think. What the critical work, if you want to call it that, does is it allows certain kinds of voices and discourses that perhaps fiction doesn't.

Larry Evers: That helps. Yes.

Greg Sarris: Yes.

Poetics and Politics

Elise Marubbio: Do you find that the term "fiction" is confining, maybe not accurate?

Greg Sarris: Well, certainly, the distinction between fiction and autobiography for so many of us is incredibly blurred whether we want to admit it or not. And the most recent example of that is the difference between Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan. Amy Tan lists her first book a fiction. Maxine Hong Kingston listed her first book an autobiography. And, certainly, there's a lot of mixing there. It's a difficult term. You write about what you know, what voices you hear. But then, you have to ask yourself. I wrote a story, "How I Got To Be Queen," which has gotten me all the attention, the movies and all that. It's about a fourteen- or fifteen-year-old young American Indian woman. And I'm not her. Or am I? To what extent and in what ways am I?

Elise Marubbio: But don't you think it has to do with who's reading it and their backgrounds?

Greg Sarris: That's how the story continues.

Elise Marubbio: And that's why I wonder if fiction is such an accurate term for you.

Greg Sarris: No, no, I mean that. I mean American Indians have suffered with that for ages, folklorists trying to classify certain things as myth versus folklore, that kind of thing. And usually there's a mixing of the two. I was

Poetics and Politics

telling Ofelia last night, we were talking about the Bering Strait theory. And I always loved the line that I heard, "We didn't come from the Bering Straits but we've got our bearings straight." We had a myth that Oswalt and a lot of the early folklorists and linguists classified from our tribe. We had a story about a whale in a creek during the last Pliocene time when the waters rose up and the earth was flooded. A whale swam up the creek and lived in this bay. And then, when the waters rose so high, all the people went high, up into a mountain, into a cave. Well, that was always listed as a myth, right, Pomo myth. So about thirty years ago, a team of geologists happened to be in the area because there had been an inland bay during the last Pliocene, ten thousand years ago. And, lo and behold, they found whale fossils. Well, they got very excited because they heard those Indians had some story about them. How could they remember that for ten thousand years and that was a myth? Well, they went up to the hill then and they carbon-dated the charcoal from fires that were in the caves and it dated to the exact same period.

Now, what's "myth"? And as I say to the Christians, and so forth, you get me some remnants of Noah's ark and then we'll see what's myth. Right? I mean, what is myth? What is story? So again, that's, I think, a perfect example of the categories, the boundaries that constitute genre,

Poetics and Politics

just melting.

Vicki Broach: In that connection, it's interesting to me the division between the critical writing you do, the memoir writing you do, the fiction and then working on screenplays too.

Greg Sarris: Right.

Vicki Broach: I loved what you were saying about being very self-conscious in your critical writing and your memoir writing. But, in some ways, it's easier to do so there. You know, you can come forward in a memoir and say, "This is who I am." Or you can come forward in a piece like "Hearing the Old Ones Talk" and say, "This is who's reading this, this is who the critic is." Whereas, in fiction, how do you do that? Can you do that? If you read "How I Got to Be Queen," one cannot read it and think, "Well, the writer is a fourteen-year-old girl of Pomo ancestry."

Greg Sarris: Right.

Vicki Broach: It doesn't work that way. Do you think there's a way that you can open up fiction that way? That the writer can be self-conscious in the fiction?

Greg Sarris: I think there could be. There have been experiments where people have done that. I mean there's been a lot of experimental forms. But why must that be? I think that what we might call fiction is the notion that somehow this isn't me. Maybe that's all, that's as much as

Poetics and Politics

we can say about fiction. That it isn't me. And that's just it.

But, certainly, I could do various things. In fact, my agent wants me to bill the thing with Mabel McKay, this autobiography of my life with Mabel, she wants me to bill it as fiction. And I said, why and how? It's not. She says, "Oh, yeah. But, but it reads that way. It reads like a novel. It reads like a story. So just call it that." And I said, "But it isn't." "Well," she said, "Well, some of it is. You've rearranged the events." And I said, "Well, yeah."

So, I mean, in that way, I'm doing that. Some of the longer pieces with Mabel, they read like short stories. I go to pick up Mabel, and we're on our way to a strawberry festival. And she does things and I do things and then it comes back. And at the end, I learn something. I mean, it could work almost like an Alice Munro short story or something like that.

Did you have a problem believing that narrator?

Vicki Broach: The character in "How I Got To Be Queen?"

Greg Sarris: Yes.

Vicki Broach: No, not at all.

Greg Sarris: That was a voice within me. It's something I know.

Vicki Broach: You've pointed to it already with Amy Tan and

Poetics and Politics

Maxine Hong Kingston, but in contemporary American fiction, there seems to be much more of a blending of autobiography with fiction. And, in fact, it's what I find more interesting than traditional forms of literature because they start to seem contrived.

Greg Sarris: "Rigged" is the term.

Nina Bjornsson: Does Jane Tompkins' work enter your thinking about this?

Greg Sarris: I like some of Jane Tompkins' stuff. Jane Tompkins does what she calls personal criticism. What I'm interested in is the relationship, the interaction with text or with the other person. A good story for me should have the details, whatever is pertinent to the interaction. Jane Tompkins is someone working in the right direction.

Chad Galts: In "Battling Illegitimacy" and then "Hearing the Old Ones Talk," you narrate the same event twice, boxing. In the longer version, "Hearing the Old Ones Talk," there's a victim that's named. The narration is different. Why?

Greg Sarris: Well, what's interesting is when we tell stories from our lives, we're using elements of our experience in different ways. It's not that I'm necessarily lying or recasting the story. It's just certain things will be revealed in context.

"Battling Illegitimacy," that's a shorter piece that

Poetics and Politics

was helping me get to what I wanted to say about definitions, how we define ourselves as Indians. So there, it wasn't necessary to go into the details about certain things to illuminate a certain history, the way it was in the second part of "Hearing the Old Ones Talk."

Chad Galts: Yes.

Greg Sarris: I haven't thought about this, but that's off the top of my head. Yes?

Kathleen Donovan: It seems like a lot of your creative work and your critical work is built on representing women, their lives and their texts. And since you talk, in "Hearing the Old Ones Talk," pretty extensively about situating yourself as a reader and audience, I'm wondering how you as a male situate yourself in representing the woman. What sort of problems do you encounter in doing that or does it present you with problems, or are there opportunities that go along with that?

Greg Sarris: It's a very good question. It has to do with the larger questions about representing anybody. I think you need to be up front about who you are and the limits, and you position yourself, even as a writer, as someone who's exploring, rather than telling. That's what I do. I write a lot about women, because I was raised around so many women. I was raised around older women. I mean, that's the crux of so much of my experience, women. So I write about

Poetics and Politics

them. But I always hope to write in a way where I'm not telling you. In fact, I think I'm pretty emphatic in "Hearing the Old Ones Talk" about it. I say, "Listen there's limits to what I can know because I am a man." And what I'd like to do is extend this to other women and have them start to talk.

Kathleen Donovan: You do mention that in one sentence in the essay. It seems an important issue. I guess I would've liked to have seen you explore it a little bit more, because it does seem to relate to the approach that you take. And I'm thinking in particular about the one story that you say your great-grandma Nettie kept casting you suspicious glances....

Greg Sarris: Right, right--

Kathleen Donovan Do you read that as possibly because you're mixed blood and you don't belong? But it's a story about rape, I think, isn't it?

Greg Sarris: Possibly. She didn't know what he wanted but he was there to overpower. Certainly it is about male-female, power relations.

Kathleen Donovan: I wonder if part of her suspicious glances could have been towards you not so much as a mixed blood but as a man?

Greg Sarris: As a young man in there with young women around. Right, right, right. Certainly, now there you told

Poetics and Politics

another story. See you're continuing the story. That's certainly a possibility. The other thing is, I didn't really write about this or explore this, is that I come from another family line. Remember, we're very suspicious of other families that come to poison. Somebody in our family might come from another place to poison or to hoodoo us. So it could have been directed at me in that way. In which case, I'd be considered very much an insider or an Indian.

I get mixed reactions. Where I come from, because I was raised around traditional people, I get, on one hand, "be careful, he'll poison you, he's got bad medicine, he's an old-time person," like that. Then, I'll have other people say, "Oh, he's really white. He's got a Ph.D.," and all this.

????: You stress the audience, how much the reader brings to the text, I was wondering what kind of vulnerability that brings you as a writer? Who do you see as an audience? You said, "We read about Native Americans to know about ourselves." Does that give the reader power to take your story however they want or make it another story?

Greg Sarris: I hope that I've provided a model where you're sensitive to the ways in which you use other people's stories. I mean, are you going to continue a dialogue? Are you going to take this and say this is what it is, or

Poetics and Politics

are you going to do what this woman just did and say, "Could you imagine that it could be like this?" This is another story, right? She's not saying this is what it is, she's asking a question. That was very good, you see?

I have no control over that. That's part of being a writer or a speaker. I bet Monday if we came back and had a discussion of what Greg said you'd have many different versions of what Greg is about, right? You're going to take it out of here. What I would hope you would take out of here is a desire to become more aware of how you're taking it out of here.

????: And this last thing, how does your community feel about your writing?

Greg Sarris: They say I'm learning. They say we haven't released him yet, he's not finished. My aunts are pretty strong. I have really tough women. They always remind me, you know, of who I am, and the limits. I mean, they'll call me Cousin Professor and Uncle Professor. Make little jokes to remind me. I often at home will speak a more pidgin English. I don't speak the so-called standard or school English. You know, we speak a more pidgin type English, Pomo, Kashaya Pomo.

I think I told Larry and Ofelia a funny story. I have this big overweight niece who's seven. She always comes around my aunt's house to beg for food and get something out

Poetics and Politics

of her refrigerator. And she came in once when I was there last summer, and she said, "Auntie, I ain't got nothin' to eat." And my aunt turned to little Diedre and said, "Diedre, Uncle Professor is here." She says, "It isn't 'I ain't got nothin', ' it's 'I ain't got anything.'" So, you know, we're very aware. But they also feel it's incredibly important that I keep who I am, and work as a mediator. I become a model for other Indian students to be able to be mediators, to be able to talk many languages. And I told my students when I used to teach composition--I taught composition for years--I said, "Standard English isn't the only English, it's just an English, it's one English, you know."

Larry Evers: We're trying to work on the position of the American Indian writer. It is a position that needs a lot of thought and questions there that really contribute to this inquiry. One is, "What constitutes an Indian point of view?" And another is, "By what and whose definition is a point of view Indian?"

Greg Sarris: Right.

Larry Evers: I wonder if you could work with those two questions a little more for us here: what constitutes an Indian point of view, and by what and whose definition is a point of view Indian?

Greg Sarris: Those are the toughest questions that we're

Poetics and Politics

wrestling with right now. In this seminar that I'm teaching at UCLA, a graduate seminar, we are wrestling, Larry, with those same kinds of things. Leslie Marmon Silko had some criticism of Louise Erdrich, saying that, in fact, her writing isn't Indian, that she uses typical narrative forms, and that her symbols and so much of what Louis Erdrich does is Catholic. Well, Louise Erdrich is an Indian, can't she also be a Catholic? Isn't that part of the Indian experience, finally? Right. And the way she's experiencing her Catholicism may not be typical. It may be a mixture.

Remember, Larry, the whole problem with this question is that we want to hang onto that notion that the boundaries of culture are not porous, that there is not a mixing. We somehow want to say, "this is Indian, and this isn't." Well, the fact that we're making those definitions means we're already caught between the two. That we're already talking about them, right? So for me, there is something about the experience in the text that will be true, regardless. Louise Erdrich is a good example. I mean, in her work you get a good sense of the funkiness of the reservations, of what I've written about as internalized oppression. You've got people back biting one another, gossiping, trying to one-up the other, because one's too light or one's too dark, you've got all that. That to me is so typical of an Indian community. It is what I know. On

Poetics and Politics

my reservation, tiny reservations, we've got Catholics, Pentecostals, Mormons, Traditionalists, and Mormons who want to be Traditionalists. There's two hundred people there. Now, which is the Indian? Each one will give you a definition. I think what's important is that somehow a truth comes forth as something distinctive. Louise Erdrich's Catholicism is distinctive. I would say that she's definitely an Indian writer. The Indian writer is writing about the Indian experience. So much is about intercultural experiences for American Indians. It always has been since contact. Just because we don't always have someone like at the end of Ceremony, where you find Yellow Woman, go out and save your life and have a vision, all of that, that doesn't mean it's not Indian. In fact I would say much of what Erdrich and Welch and those people are doing is much more realistic than the ending of Ceremony. At the end of Ceremony you've got a realistic situation, but it's not solved in any way that someone who doesn't have a vision can deal with. As I say about The Color Purple, it's a wonderful book, but it's basically a black lesbian Cinderella story. How many poor black women will have a famous blues singer come and save their life and get their land back for them? What happens to the 99.9 percent of us who don't have that experience, what options do we have? What happens to those of us Indians who don't have access to

Poetics and Politics

a new age medicine man like Betonie? Who can help us find our cows? What options do we have?

Those are some of the questions I take up in "How I Got to Be Queen." In that story, I think what she has an opportunity to do is to see and understand her context. That's a kind of medicine way in itself. That's Indian. In the screenplay version of the story, Auntie walks Alice around at the end of the shooting when Alice breaks down. Auntie walks Alice around in a circle. And even though it's not your traditional ceremony, it's a reenactment of a ceremony in a contemporary situation.

Larry Evers: So, a touchstone is relationship to a community?

Greg Sarris: Relationship, yes.

Larry Evers: A community that thinks of itself as an Indian community, but Indian is always a term that is defined and redefined in those settings?

Greg Sarris: Right. That's what's so good, again, I think about Erdrich. You get people who have very different definitions in Love Medicine of what it means to be Indian, just as you do in Tracks and in Beet Queen. She shows those different voices in a community. But, I think you do have to have some sense of a community, a relationship with a community, even if it's a distanced one. I think where I would draw the line is with writers, and I'm always

Poetics and Politics

suspicious of this for some reason, I have a problem with Dorris writing about a tribe that's not his tribe. I mean, then it seems like he's extending it a bit. And how does he know about Blackfeet? I wouldn't want him writing about Pomo. Right. I mean, that's not a tribe that he knows, or he knows that experience. Maybe he does know about the Blackfeet, I don't know. I find his book less successful than Louise's. But, I have problems where there's a sense you're inventing characters from other places, which a lot of non-Indians have done. And I think, though, the telling is in the prose, is in the stories. I can sense when it isn't ringing true, or when this is a stereotype. Or, if I don't have much of a context here for this. You know, where you get those two dimensional or those dime store Indians in various new ways that keeps coming through. Yes?

????: I'm thinking about the boundary ideas that you have been talking about. It seems hard for me to know what is a porous boundary and what's not. You feel okay about imagining yourself to be a teenage girl, but you don't feel comfortable with someone else imagining what it's like to be a member of another tribe?

Greg Sarris: Yes. Because I know that girl. That's part of my tribe, my experience.

????: Who decides who knows?

Greg Sarris: Well, obviously the author. And as I said,

Poetics and Politics

the ultimate test is in the prose itself. And so I want to qualify what I said. The ultimate test is in the prose. If you're from another community, and you do a fine job, and you've experienced it, and you're able to convey that experience, I would have no problem with that. It's just that in most of my experience, reading other representations there tends to be a flatness, a problem. I, for example, have a real problem with Dorris's book because the woman, the character Rayona, is bi-racial. And she comes to terms with her Indianness at the end of the book, but what about her African heritage? And you know damn well on that Indian reservation they're always going to remind her that she's Afro-American. What's she going to do about that?

????: Maybe that's another book.

Greg Sarris: Maybe that's another book, too. I remember at the MLA somebody asking my aunts, we had a panel there, "Pomo Women Talking Story," we were just talking about how a lot of people don't know certain things, and you don't know a lot of things from other tribes, and somebody said to my aunts who are Pomo, "Well, what do you think about Tony Hillerman, you know, he writes about Navajo?" And, of course, I was sitting back, you know it was supposed to be the women talking, and I didn't say a word, and my Auntie Anita turned to me and she said, "Who the hell is Tony Hillerman?" They said to me, "Do you know who he is?" And

Poetics and Politics

I said, "Oh, yes, I know who he is." And so they said, "Well, what do you think about his representations of Navajo?" I said, "Are there any Navajos in the room? They'd be much better to address the question."

????: Roberta Hill Whiteman talked about living in the city and how she really doesn't like living in a city. She felt like she wanted to be closer to the land, living on the reservation. How do you like living in L.A., which is a big city?

Greg Sarris: I knew you were going to ask that. I'll tell you two things. In many ways, I love L.A. because I'm young, aggressive, and partly neurotic. If you've got those things, L.A.'s great. I can't stand the traffic. I miss my home. We were just up there looking at locations for the movie, up in the Redwoods where my home is. I love it, I miss it. And then when I'm up there after two or three weeks, with all the problems on the reservation, the crazy things that go on, I want to come back. But, the land is first for me. And at night when I can't sleep, and I hear the cars in L.A. and I think of the traffic, I think of the Redwoods. I think of the ocean. I think of the Russian River. And I think of the old songs, the sheep on the hillside, and all of that, the land. For me, Santa Rosa and that whole area of Sonoma County is where my history is. That's my home. The town of Santa Rosa with the mixing of

Poetics and Politics

races, the reservation an hour away from the town. That is my home. In fact, I was telling a friend last night that my dream would be to spend maybe ten weeks a year in L.A. teaching a class or two and doing business, and spending the rest of my time writing and living up on the land, being on the land. The land's first. The land, for me, is everything. I like L.A., I love, as they say, the energy of L.A. I like that. People are ambitious and things are happening, but I don't know how long I can take it. I mean, I've only been there six months.

????: Do you have an urban Indian community in L.A.?

Greg Sarris: Yes. I'm so busy. I work fourteen, fifteen hours a day. I've done some work through the University, but I haven't had much of a chance.

Gloria Bird: I have a question. I think the way that you write is real similar to Leslie Silko.

Greg Sarris: That's a compliment, thanks.

Gloria Bird: The question is about stories: How is it that we're not separate from the stories?

Greg Sarris: Well, in Ceremony, that's the whole notion. People always ask me, what are universals between cultures, Indian cultures. I think that's one of them. Through all the tribes the stories are living. The whole job is to make them a part of you, part of your life. They're not separate. I mean in the old days, in my tribe, people used

Poetics and Politics

to buy and sell stories and songs. And they had power, they could kill or cure or do all kinds of things like that, even get you lovers. You have to feed those stories and keep telling them, and have dinners and picnics and all that for these stories that you owned because they're living, you know. Certain stories and certain songs you can't die until you pass those on, until you know that they're living elsewhere. That's why when we see really old, old Indians, they say, "Oh, she's not giving up something yet." "She's holding onto that story, she hasn't found someone to give it to." Maybe this comes back to the whole question about fiction and nonfiction--what I'm trying to do is what Leslie did in Ceremony, show a blending of voices in a story. And show that how if we bridge this chasm, how stories will in fact become a part of our life. That's what I'm trying to do.

Larry Evers: One kind of American Indian community has to do with Santa Rosa and the reservation and the community that you knew there. Another American Indian community might be the community of American Indian writers. Do you have anything to say about the reality or non-reality of a community of Native American writers?

Greg Sarris: Well, I think it's wonderful, and I am so proud because there are so many of us doing so many wonderful things. It really speaks highly of all Indian

Poetics and Politics

communities that so many of us remember. We're a small group in this country, and yet the number of us who are writing fiction and writing poetry is staggering. I'm so proud to be among people who I admire. I look at them as models, and I'm watching for the ways they're doing the various things we're talking about. In what ways are they negotiating cultural variables? We're all doing this. We're all cultural mediators, but we're doing it with our own experience. I'm looking at the ways we're doing that. As a community of writers we get to inform one another and give each other a sense of how we can do this. What ways can we do this? What are the ways Jim Welch does it? What are the ways Leslie's done it? It's so good to look at these people, and in many ways maybe I'm just reading what I want to read, but they're doing so much of what I would like to do. They're really talking about their communities, and in ways that are both universal and particular, particular to their communities but universal to a lot of Indian concerns and to concerns beyond the Indian community. I think we really need to applaud that community and keep ourselves together. We're writing great stuff.